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GLUYAS

LORD SIN

SHE WAS AN
INNOCENT BEAUTY
OF WILD DESIRE - A THE EMBRACE
STAR-CROSSED LOVERS

UNHOLY COUPLING

Beautiful Annaliza Sedgewick was a parson's daughter, as unspoiled and untamed as the wild cliffs of Cornwall.

Lord Jonathan Sinclair was the most handsome and infamous nobleman in eighteenth-century England, with the pick of London's ladies at his feet and in his bed.

Their first meeting exploded in violence, as Annaliza learned the power of lust within her, and Sinclair for the first time felt the seductive stirrings of love. Annaliza fought against her own desire by leaguing herself with a man sworn to destroy her conqueror. Sinclair sought to mock his heart's hunger with orgies of the flesh.

And both were swept up in a mounting whirlwind of intrigue and passion that seemed certain to tear them apart before it could ever make them one....

LORD SIN

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THE HOUSE ON TWYFORD STREET
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THE PASSIONATE SAVAGE

FORCED CONFESSION

"How dare you touch me! I hate you!" Annaliza said.
"Do you hear me? I hate you!"

Lord Jonathan Sinclair raised his head and looked at her.
"I know you hate me. But for all your hatred, you want
me. Can you deny it?"

Her breasts heaved against the smooth fabric of his jacket.
Her face flushed as she felt a mad urge to tear his clothes
from him, to expose once again to her hungry eyes the
lean, brown, muscled length of him.

Catching sight of herself in the long mirror, Annaliza
shuddered and closed her eyes. What a shameful picture
she had seen. She, standing naked in the notorious Lord
Sin's arms, her color high, her mouth loose and wanton.

"Open your eyes, Annaliza," he commanded. "Look at me
and tell me you don't want me."

"You want it all, don't you, Sin?" A flash of anger came,
strengthening her voice, even as her arms snaked around
his neck, her body molding itself to his. "Why do you
wait, Sin? Take me, take me now!"

LORD SIN

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By
Constance Gluyas



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1



Annaliza felt stifled by the intense heat of the day. She was tired, her feet in the unaccustomed slippers with their modishly high heels ached excruciatingly, and she was uneasily aware that her never equable temper was beginning to fray. How much longer would they have to wait? she wondered impatiently. Her full, soft mouth set in a tight line as she was jostled from behind. "Be careful," she snapped, turning to glare at the woman who had pushed her.

"And you just mind your manners, you young snip," the woman answered her in a hard voice. "Sorry about pushing you, but there's no need to be glaring at me."

Coloring, Annaliza bit back a heated reply. Turning her eyes to the front again, she concentrated on her grievances. She and her father, with the hot sweating bodies of the crowd pressing against them, had been standing in the same position for an interminable time as they waited for the royal procession to pass by. She moved restlessly, her brown golden-flecked eyes narrowing against the strong August sunshine glaring from a sky of harsh blue. Surreptitiously, in case her father should notice and be distressed by her discomfort, she applied her handkerchief to the little rivulets of perspiration that coursed down her face and throat. Had she known that the wait would be so long, she thought, plucking at the neck of her unsuitable thick cloth gown, she would have worn her figured muslin and the big shady hat that tied with wide satin ribbons beneath her chin. The hat, as well as the jaunt to London, had been her father's birthday present to her.

Annaliza looked considerably at her father, the Reverend Giles Sedgewick, her eyes softening as she gazed at his eager profile. He had believed that the trip, together with the added thrill of seeing the royal procession pass by, would be an ideal gift for her. She sighed and smiled faintly. Her father

loved her, but he did not really know her. Gentle and unworldly, he was the exact opposite of her. She was quick-tempered, passionate in all her emotions, and determined to have her own way. Perhaps her only virtue, she thought, her smile turning wry, was her deep love for her father. She had not been able to bring herself to tell him that she had no interest in royalty, and certainly no interest in London. This was her second trip to the city, and she had conceived a profound dislike of the gray, narrow streets filled with rubbish, the noisome smells that rose from the gutters, and the busy, bustling people, who, it seemed to her, were grim, unsmiling, and unfriendly. To her, fun was galloping about her beloved Cornish countryside astride her favorite mare, her lungs filled with the fragrant salt-spiced air.

"Annaliza . . ." Smiling, the reverend touched her hand. "Are you enjoying yourself, child?"

Startled out of her brooding thoughts, Annaliza returned the smile. "Yes, Father," she lied. "It's all so exciting."

"I'm glad, darling. I always think there's a special tingle in the air on these occasions. We must make the most of it, for it isn't often we can manage a trip to gay London, eh?"

Annaliza nodded dutifully; then, as her father's attention was diverted, she went back to her thoughts. Her father still looked upon her as a child, and yet, on this day, August 3, 1783, she was celebrating her eighteenth birthday. She was no longer the little girl he had romped with in those halcyon days when her mother was still alive. If anything, since her mother's death it was her father who had become the child, for without his wife he was a lost soul. She had tried to take her mother's place in the running of the household, hoping in this way to ease a little of her father's pain. At present they were indifferently cared for by Ellen, their maid-of-all-work, and by a cook who, though cheerful and willing, put out some reprehensible meals.

Annaliza's hand tightened about the handle of her lace parasol, another gift from her father. She had been just fourteen when her mother died; now, at eighteen, she intended to have more authority over the servants. There were many things she would change in her effort to bring her father domestic comfort. She could not even think of marriage with Richard Manford until things were running smoothly. Richard, she thought with an inner grimace. She did not know even now if she truly loved him, but he was probably the only man who would ever look at her with love and

desire. She was plain, and she must face that fact, distasteful though it was.

Giles Sedgewick cast a sidelong glance at his daughter's absorbed countenance. In believing that he did not know her, Annaliza was mistaken; he was all too aware of her faults. She had a tomboyish streak that was constantly getting her into scrapes, a hot temper, and a distressingly sharp tongue. But despite her defects, her unfortunate habit of coming out with the most outrageous and tactless remarks, he loved her dearly. He would have been amazed had he known his daughter's poor opinion of her looks. To Giles, Annaliza's abundant glossy black hair, her bright, almost sherry-colored eyes, her delicate-featured piquant face, her slim, graceful figure, made up a portrait of beauty.

Straightening his spare shoulders, Giles looked away, frowning. If only Annaliza would stop to think before she spoke, she would be an altogether admirable daughter. Her tactlessness, as he well knew, had offended many of his parishioners. The trouble was that although she cheerfully helped the needy, she resented the malingeringers who would not work, and she did not scruple to say so.

Giles shifted his aching feet, his frown deepening as he thought of one more thing that troubled him, Annaliza's close friendship with Richard Manford. He was not normally one to pass judgment without proof of wrongdoing, but there were disturbing rumors about Manford, strange happenings that would seem to link him with a notorious gang of smugglers who operated along that stretch of the Cornish coast that was nearest to their home. He had even heard that Manford was the leader of the gang. Unable to sift truth from lie, and worried that Annaliza might be unwittingly involved, he had once more spoken to her disapprovingly about her friendship with the man. As a rule sensitive to the things that troubled him, she had, in this case, appeared to close her ears to his opinion. She had continued with the friendship, and his worry had increased day by day. It was for this reason, as well as to give her pleasure, that he had brought her to London for a short spell.

Unaware of his concern for her, Annaliza straightened from her slumped position as her quick ears picked up the sound of military music, the hollow booming of drums, the precise stepping of marching feet, accompanied by the jingle of harness and the brittle clopping of horses' hooves. She grasped her father's thin arm, surprising herself by the sudden tingle of excitement she felt. The royal procession

marked no particular occasion, her father had informed her. Once in every two months, the royal family graciously chose to show themselves to their people. She smiled at her father's tall spare figure straightened to attention. His hand touched her shoulder, squeezing tightly. There could be no doubt, she thought, as the procession swung round a corner and headed slowly in their direction, that the people liked these intimate views of the royal family. Their cheers were deafening as they surged forward, struggling to obtain a better view.

Strangely, as she was jostled and pushed and all but knocked off her feet, Annaliza found her good humor returning. At least, having endured the heat, the pestering attention of the flies, and the smell of close-packed sweating humanity, they had a good position in the front.

"Exciting, isn't it?" Giles's usually soft voice was raised to a shout.

Annaliza nodded and smiled. Managing once more to obtain a firm grip on his arm, she gave her attention to the colorful sight. Sun glinting on the brass helmets of the cavalry trotting their impeccably groomed and beribboned mounts in front of the first carriage caused her to narrow her eyes to protect them from the dazzle. With the booming of the drums vibrating in her ears, she admired the scarlet-coated foot soldiers marching in slow precision before the cavalry, before turning her eyes to the occupants of the first carriage. The carriage did not, as she had supposed, carry the king and queen. Instead, a young man in naval uniform was seated there; beside him was a fresh-faced pretty girl. Opposite them were two children. The children, emulating their elders, waved and smiled at the cheering people. Annaliza opened her mouth to ask her father who the four occupants of the carriage were, and then decided against it. Even though he would recognize the king and queen, and possibly the Prince of Wales, the secluded life he led made it unlikely that he would recognize other famous faces.

Becoming conscious of her drab brown gown and her serviceable bonnet. Annaliza could not help a twinge of envy as her eyes lingered on the girl beside the naval officer. The pretty, smiling face and the shining brown hair were framed by the new-fashion poke bonnet. The bonnet, of white straw, had been made in a lacy pattern, so that little dots of sunlight stippled her face. She wore a matching white lace gown, the square bodice cut low enough to partially reveal her immature breasts. Dainty white silk mittens embroidered with

colored flowers encased her small hands, and a triple row of pearls circled her slender throat.

"Look, Annaliza," Giles shouted above the roar of the cheering crowd, "here comes the king and queen!"

George III sat stiffly upright in his seat, his face very red, his eyebrows beetling. He, too, wore a naval uniform, but in contrast to the young man, he looked hot and uncomfortable. Unsmiling, he waved from side to side, the action lifeless and without enthusiasm. Looking at him, Annaliza remembered hearing that he was occasionally afflicted by queer spells, thought by some to be the onset of insanity. Was it true, she wondered, or only a false and malicious rumor put about by the enemies of the House of Hanover? He looked glum, she decided, but there was nothing in his grim face to indicate insanity. Beside him, the queen consort, Charlotte Sophia, with her radiant face and her dimpling smile, more than made up for any lack in her royal husband. Her figure, clad in an unflattering pale blue gown, was decidedly buxom, but nevertheless she was a handsome woman. Beneath her blue poke bonnet her face had a high, healthy color, her teeth were very white, and her brown hair, where the sunlight touched it, showed glints of gold; her expression was kindly, giving her a motherly look. Seated facing the king and queen was a fair-haired young man in formal dress. He was, Annaliza gathered from the excited voices, Prince William.

A shout went up, more ringing than any that had gone before, "Prinny! Here comes Prinny, God bless him!"

The twenty-one-year-old Prince of Wales was magnificent in a green velvet jacket and matching breeches, embroidered thickly in a design of small gold flowers and hovering bees. The points of his stiff white collar, bound by a wide satin cravat of the same green, were so high as to be almost ludicrous, and made it difficult for him to turn his head from side to side. His crisp blond hair had been carefully arranged in the latest Grecian style, and his smiling fresh-complexioned face was, Annaliza thought, pleasant to look upon. Curiously she glanced at the man seated beside the prince. Her breath caught in a startled gasp, her eyes widening as she stared. He was as dark as the prince was fair. The sunlight glinting on his uncovered head gave to his thickly curling hair the blue-black sheen of a crow's wing. His eyes appeared to her to be as dark as his hair, his features dominant, with a slightly hawkish cast; his skin was a warm golden brown, as though he spent much time in the sun, and his strong chin was deeply clefted. Unlike the prince, he wore clothing of a

simple elegance, unadorned by embroidery, causing the other man to fade into insignificance. Becoming aware that she was staring, Annaliza looked away, but she retained the image of him. He was the handsomest man she had ever seen.

The woman standing close to Annaliza, having subsided for a few moments, started up again. Shrieking with excitement, she pointed at the dark man. "Look, look," she cried in a shrill voice, "it's Lord Sin!"

Annaliza stiffened. Lord Sin, the prince's best friend? Even in the remote part of Cornwall where she lived and where, inevitably, news or scandal was slow to travel, she had heard of the notorious Lord Jonathan Sinclair, nicknamed appropriately Lord Sin by the Prince of Wales. His morals apparently left much to be desired, and some of the stories related about him were so fantastic as to be almost incredible. This man, then, with his dark, handsome face and his aloof expression, was the fabulous Lord Sin. She felt suddenly and unreasonably angry. A man had no right to be so handsome and so wicked at the same time.

Annaliza started as a slight holdup brought the prince's carriage to a halt directly before her. Color scorched her cheeks as Lord Sin, his expression faintly bored, turned his head and looked straight at her. The foolish anger surging again, she stared back at him with hostile eyes, her expression openly contemptuous. Their eyes locked for what seemed to her to be a very long moment; then, unable to control the childish impulse that came to her, she contorted her face into a hideous grimace.

Except for the sardonic lift of his brows that acknowledged her childishness, Lord Sin was expressionless. He turned his head away as the carriage started up again, his dark eyes dismissing her as being of little account.

If the ground had opened up and swallowed her, Annaliza would have been passionately grateful, so great was her embarrassment. She must have been mad to do such a thing. What on earth had possessed her?

"Annaliza!" Giles's raised voice startled her. "I saw what you did. How could you be so rude, I am ashamed of you."

"I'm sorry, Father, truly sorry." She put a hand to her hot face and looked at him appealingly. "Do you think . . . may we go now, please?"

Giles's severe expression faded as he regarded his daughter's hot, embarrassed face. "You do not wish to see the rest of the procession?" he said uncertainly.

"If you don't mind, Father, I . . . I would rather not." She

searched her mind for a convenient excuse, finally blurting out the first thing that came to her. "I have a headache, and I am very hot and tired."

"Then of course we will go." Giles smiled at her. "This is your birthday, and your wish is my command."

Conscious of his concealed disappointment, Annaliza squeezed his arm repentantly. "It is selfish of me to drag you away, when you are enjoying it so much. Why don't you stay? I can return to our lodgings alone."

"Certainly not." Giles looked shocked. "London is no place for a young lady to be wandering alone."

"Father! I am eighteen. I have reached the age when I can take care of myself."

Giles hid a smile. "A responsible age indeed, but nevertheless I will accompany you." He hesitated, then added wistfully, "Annaliza, you did enjoy yourself?"

With thoughts of the dark man still troubling her mind, Annaliza smiled brightly. "Very much," she answered. "You have given me a wonderful day." She squeezed his arm again. "A day to remember."

In the carriage, the Prince of Wales was still chuckling over the small incident. "Before God, Sin," he boomed in his rich voice, "I vow that little wench has quite made my day. Never did I think to see Lord Sin spurned by a female, and in such an extraordinary way." Drawing a lace-trimmed handkerchief from his wide cuff, he wiped his watering eyes. "Pulling a face at you, by God, it did my heart good."

Lord Sinclair smiled faintly. "I am happy your Highness is amused."

The prince chuckled again. "My Highness, eh? We are very formal all of a sudden. Am I to take it that you were not amused, Sin?"

Sinclair shrugged. "It was unimportant."

Sobering, the prince looked at his friend curiously. "You're right, of course, but it was amusing. Still, I should know by now that nothing ever stirs you."

Sinclair looked down at his gloved hands resting lightly on his knees. "I would not quite say that," he said lightly. "The thought of losing to you tonight at the gaming tables does stir in me a certain emotion." He looked up, his dark eyes smiling. "However, I feel it's only fair to warn you that I am feeling lucky today."

"Ah," the prince answered in a laughing voice, "but it

might well be that the wench with the mobile face has put a blight on your luck."

"Never fear, George."

"I won't fear. I too am feeling lucky." Grinning, the prince leaned closer. "Should you feel inclined to throw in your latest mistress, the luscious Dolly Parker, it will make the winning all the sweeter."

With a faint distaste Sinclair averted his eyes from the prince's flushed face. "I am sure it would," he said in a dry voice. "But we must allow Dolly to make up her own mind, must we not?"

The prince seemed not to notice the rebuke. "If Dolly will have me," he said eagerly, "will you raise any objection?"

"Dolly would not dare to refuse you," Sinclair said in mock horror. "As for myself, who am I to oppose the Prince of Wales?"

"Dammit, Sin," the prince snapped, his jovial smile disappearing, "I don't appreciate your sarcasm. Never since I've known you have you had the slightest respect for my wishes."

"Never? You surely cannot believe that, George?"

The prince bristled at the undisguised note of amusement in the deep, drawling voice. "Curse you for a disrespectful rogue, sir! I asked you if you would raise any objection."

"Not a single objection." Sinclair's smile was cynical. "Dolly, I feel sure, will be delighted to become your mistress. Should you win, of course."

"But I am not so sure of her delight," the prince said in a petulant voice. "Everybody knows that Dolly is mad for you."

"Make your mind easy, George." Sinclair's shrug was eloquent. "Dolly is not so mad for me that she cannot be tempted by the Prince of Wales."

The prince smiled, his good humor returning. "You're a cool one, Sin. Tell me, have you ever been in love?"

Sinclair settled back against the cushion. "If I have," he said in a bored voice, "it has slipped my memory." He gave the prince a sidelong look. "Your Highness should wave to the people. You would not wish them to be disappointed in their prince."

2



Lady Araminta Sinclair frowned as the clock finished striking eleven. Normally, at this hour of the morning, she was gowned and coiffured and ready to take her daily promenade in the park. This particular morning, however, was different. So great was her agitation of mind that she was still in her wrapper, her face untended, her graying hair loose about her shoulders.

Throwing a burning look of reproach at her son, wasted on him, since he stood by the window, his back toward her, she drew the wrapper tightly about her plump form and seated herself on the long couch drawn up before the fireless grate. Her son was fully dressed, she noted with some bitterness, which was hardly surprising, since he had arrived home only an hour ago. She leaned back against the soft cushions, her lips tightly compressed, a frown fretting her brow. Lord Sin, her son was now commonly called, and not without reason. It was unfortunate that she herself, from the moment of his birth, had always called him Sin. Now, in her use of the name, it might be thought by some of the busybodies that she condoned his shameless behavior. She shrugged. They must think what they pleased. She could not, after all these years, start calling him Jonathan.

Sighing, nervously postponing the moment when she must speak, Lady Araminta let her thoughts drift to the group of friends whom she usually met in the park at this hour. No doubt they were busily discussing the latest scandal about Sin, she thought, experiencing another spasm of bitterness. Fanny Greves, for instance, pretending to be shocked and scandalized, would be enjoying herself immensely. Save in her presence, Sin was spoken of in hushed whispers, and yet she knew that there was not a woman in that gossiping clique

who would not give a great deal to be the latest object of Sin's attention.

Lady Araminta glanced at Sin's tall, elegant figure with that warm pride that she could never quite suppress, no matter how outrageously he might behave. Despite his night's activity, the nature of which she did not care to guess, there was not a wrinkle in the black evening coat that fitted so snugly across his broad shoulders and followed faithfully the contours of his narrow-waisted trim figure. The black satin breeches were likewise without a crease, his cream stockings straight, and his buckled shoes bearing their accustomed high gloss. Did she not know otherwise, she might have thought he had just come from the hands of Melton, his valet. Only the slight disarray of his black neckcloth and a certain lack of crispness in the frills of his white silk shirt gave him away.

Regarding him closely, her eyes softened. Perhaps it was not fair to blame Sin entirely, not when you considered how most women responded to his austerely handsome face and his aloof personality. It seemed that women could not leave him alone, so was it any wonder that he took what they were so willing to give?

Startled, Lady Araminta took herself sternly to task. She must not, even in her mind, defend Sin. It would never do if he should guess that she was not always angry and shocked at his exploits, or that something within her thrilled at, rather than condemned, his romantic adventures. Were he to know of this weakness of hers, it would weaken her position, if, of course, she could be said to have a position. With her son, not even she could be quite sure. Nevertheless, no matter what people said about him, there was no real evil in his nature.

Freshly exasperated with herself, Lady Araminta bit her lip. There she went again, making excuses for him. It simply would not do. This time he had gone too far. This matter of Lydia Pennywell, the actress, was sufficiently grave that she must put aside her policy of not interfering in his affairs. Unnerved by the confrontation she had planned, she rose to her feet. If only her husband were not dead, or Sin more like herself. If he were, she would know how to deal with him. Playing for time, she picked up a green velvet cushion and picked nervously at the gold braid decorating it. Flinging the cushion back on the couch, she took a deep-steadying breath. A pretty pass she had come to if she feared a snubbing from her own son. Drawing herself up to her full height of five

feet one inch, she moistened her lips and prepared to speak. "Sin."

He turned from the window at once. "What, Mother, are you still here?"

"What do you mean?" she said indignantly. "You knew very well that I was still here."

"Perhaps," he conceded. "You are unusually silent this morning. You're not ailing, are you?"

"Certainly I'm not ailing. I must speak to you. Something has come to my ears which has me greatly disturbed."

"Indeed?" He smiled at her, that special smile which he seemed to reserve exclusively for her. Crossing the room with his quick lithe stride, he seated himself. "Sit down, Mother, and tell me about it." His dark eyes studied her flushed face intently. "What has you so upset?"

Sinking back onto the couch, she looked at him rather helplessly. "You know," she said in a plaintive voice, "it has always been a source of wonder to me that your excesses do not show in your face."

His right eyebrow quirked, a habit of his when amused. "And that is what is upsetting you?"

"Of course not." Seeing that his dark eyes were smiling, she took heart. "I am upset by the rumor I heard yesterday. Will you tell me if it is true?"

Sin's long fingers toyed with the seals dangling from his black satin waistcoat. "If you will tell me the nature of this rumor," he suggested.

"You know very well, you wretched boy!" she cried, fired with indignation.

He looked up. "Don't shout, Mother. Unless, of course, this discussion between us is meant to entertain the servants."

"Oh, you . . . you . . . You will not deny, I suppose, that you drove Lydia Pennywell in your curriole, in full view of everybody?"

"No, I'll not deny it." Sin looked at her curiously. "But why should it have you in such a lather? Lydia is an uncommonly handsome piece, and I am not the first to take her up. There is nothing out of the way about my actions."

"Is there not. I hear that you have promised marriage to this . . . this actress."

"What!" Sin sat up straight in his chair and gave her his full attention. "Absurd! Where did you hear this rumor?"

"Is it only a rumor? I only know that it is on everybody's lips." She paused, then added bitterly, "I imagine Lydia Pen-

nywell is your latest mistress, though I had thought the current one was Dolly Parker."

"You are mistaken, Mother," he said sharply, his look faintly condemning. "Lydia is not my mistress. May we now dispense with the subject?"

"We may not." She had gone too far now to retreat. "Have you promised marriage to this actress?"

"I have already denied it, Mother."

"Not . . . not specifically."

Sin frowned. "Very well, if you must have it in so many words. I have not proposed nor do I intend proposing marriage to Lydia. Are you satisfied now?"

She looked at him doubtfully. "Are you quite sure that you did not propose to her?"

"Since I am not yet in my dotage, Mother," he said in an austere voice, "you may take it that I am sure."

Lady Araminta gave him a small apologetic smile. "No, dearest, not in your dotage, but you are often in your cups."

Sin stiffened. "I do not believe you have ever seen me the worse for drink."

"Oh, no, dear, you are always in perfect control. But control of your legs and your speech does not necessarily mean that you are not intoxicated."

Against his will, Sin laughed. "You are much too clever for me, Mother. But intoxicated or not, give me credit for knowing whether I have made a proposal of marriage."

"Of course, darling." Lady Araminta was swept with remorse. "I am sorry," she said, looking at him with love.

Sin's eyes softened. "I am the one who should be apologizing to you. I am aware, Mother, that I have given you much cause for anxiety."

"Oh, no, darling," she cried, immediately reversing herself. "You must not say so."

"It's the truth; therefore I must say so." Sin's eyes took in her disheveled hair and the bright pink wrapper. "I would have you know," he said softly, deliberately changing the subject, "that pink is very definitely not your color. If I am to take you for a drive in the park, I hope you will brush your hair and put on something more becoming."

She fluttered like a young girl. "Do I look so very dreadful?"

Smiling, he winked at her. "In any condition, you are always beautiful. I happen to be one of those unfortunates, you see, who believes that all mothers are beautiful."

He could always surprise her with that delightful and dis-

concerting tenderness of his, and certainly, when he chose to be charming, he was very hard to resist. "Will you really take me for a drive, darling?" she said, beaming at him fondly.

He smiled sleepily. "You will not misconstrue and think I am proposing marriage?"

She laughed happily. "I promise."

"And do you also promise not to offend my eyes by wearing that atrocious color?"

"I will not wear pink, if you do not care for it. We see so little of each other that it will be a great treat for me to ride out with you." She hesitated, disliking to break the mood of the moment. "There is another matter on which I would speak, one that is very close to my heart."

"You may speak to me on any matter you choose." He eyed her warily. "Always provided it is not a further variation on the last theme."

"Of course not. I wanted to speak to you on the subject of marriage."

"Ah. Not the last theme, then, but the well-worn old one." His dark eyebrows drew together in a formidable frown, "Mother, why go on with this? You have made it perfectly clear that you wish me to marry. I, in my turn, have likewise made it clear that I have no intention of marrying. Let that suffice, if you please."

"Please listen to me." Lady Araminta fixed him with earnest blue eyes. "There is nothing that would make me happier than to see you settled. What of Melisande Winters? She is a lovely girl, and very much in love with you."

His face wore a closed haughty expression that shut her out. "In regard to Melisande's feelings, I am quite sure you are mistaken. As for myself, much as I admire and respect Melisande, I have not the faintest desire to marry her, or, for that matter, any other woman. I am perfectly satisfied with my life."

Choosing to ignore the last part of his speech, Lady Araminta descended to pleading. "If you feel you cannot love Melisande, I am sure another will come along who will change your mind. Please at least think about it. I—"

"I know you, Mother, I know what is in your mind. Do not trouble to parade this season's belles for my benefit. I tell you I have no intention of making an offer. I will not shackle myself to one woman. Is that clear?"

"Very clear." Lady Araminta sighed mournfully. "But you

are twenty-eight years old. It is high time you found someone on whom to fix your heart."

"I have no heart, or so I have been told on numerous occasions."

"Nonsense!" Lady Araminta's eyes flashed indignantly. "You have a great deal of heart. Those who say you do not are fools and can have no conception of your true character." She reached out her hand to touch his, her fingers stroking gently. "Darling, promise me you will think about what I have said."

Sin nodded. "It does no harm to think, I suppose. If and when I find a girl with whom I can bear to spend the rest of my life, you will be the first to know."

Lady Arminta's soft mood passed. "Provided she will have you," she said tartly. Glancing at his set face, she knew it would be useless to persist. "Very well, then, I will own myself to be defeated for the moment."

"For more than a moment. I trust," he answered dryly.

Deeming it advisable to end the discussion, Lady Araminta was about to rise to her feet when a commotion in the hall caused her to sink back again. She looked at her son with some alarm as a woman's raised voice came to her, the tone so shrill that she was unable to distinguish words. Chadwick, the butler, appeared to be arguing with the woman. "What on earth is going on out there?" Lady Araminta asked.

"I have no idea."

A brief tap on the door and its abrupt opening disclosed the agitated Chadwick. The old butler looked considerably shaken, and his eyes expressed disapproval. "My lord," he said in his precise voice, "there is a person without who insists upon seeing you."

"A person?" Sin smiled. "Am I to take it that you do not approve of this person, Chadwick?"

Ignoring the faint amusement in the drawling voice, the old man drew himself up. "It is not my place to say, my lord, but if you are asking me, I would say that the person is not a lady." His voice sank to a scandalized whisper. "The young woman is wearing makeup, which a true lady would not do."

Guiltily aware of the rice powder she used on her own face, and the red paste she applied to her lips, Lady Araminta said in a stifled voice, "Did she give a name, Chadwick?"

"She did, my lady. Her name is Miss Lydia Pennywell."

Ignoring his mother's startled gasp, Sin said in a cool voice, "You may show her in, Chadwick."

Chadwick sniffed. "If your lordship prefers, I will summon Thomas to eject her."

"Do not trouble yourself, Chadwick."

Encountering the hard look in the dark eyes, the butler spoke stiffly. "Very good, my lord."

Sin waited until the butler's disapproving back was out of sight before turning to the stunned Lady Araminta. "I am quite sure, Mother," he said casually, "that you would prefer not to be present at this particular interview. I really think that—"

"If that's your mother," a loud voice interrupted from the doorway, "I want her to be present." Brushing past the shocked Chadwick, Lydia Pennywell strolled into the room. Her rouged lips parted in a wide smile as she looked from Sin to Lady Araminta. "I was listening," she confessed. "I always listen when I think it's to my own best interest. A girl can't be too careful, can she?"

Her heart sinking, Lady Araminta stared wide-eyed at the girl. Lydia Pennywell, though her coarse voice grated unpleasantly on the ear, was a vision of loveliness. She was of medium height with a slender and exquisitely proportioned figure. Her complexion, obviously enhanced by the makeup of which Chadwick had spoken so disparagingly, was a flawless ivory with a faint pink flush glowing on the high cheekbones; her eyes, large, lustrous, and vividly blue, were framed by thick black lashes. Her wealth of shining blond hair was elaborately curled and puffed in the latest style, and set off by a saucy little red bonnet which tied beneath her firm dimpled chin with wide ribbons of the same color. The bodice of her red silk gown was surprisingly demure for one in her profession, Lady Araminta thought. She listened to the pleasant rustling sound the prettily ruched hem made as the girl moved toward her son. Dismayed, she thought it quite possible that Sin, while intoxicated, had proposed to this exotic and beautiful creature.

Resting her slender white hand possessively on Sin's black-clad arm, Lydia turned her head and smiled at Lady Araminta. "Me and this handsome son of yours is going to get married," she announced. "But there, I expect I'm late with the news. He'll already have told you."

"No," Lady Araminta's voice trembled, "he has said nothing to me."

"That's naughty of him." Lydia shrugged. "But just the same, it's true." Her eyes narrowed as she met Sin's amused gaze. "Tell your mother it's true, darling."

"I applaud you, Lydia," Sin answered mockingly. "You really play your part very well." He removed her clinging hand. "Might I suggest that you turn your talent on someone easier to hoodwink than I."

Lydia's beautiful eyes turned hard, and her pretense at gentility dropped from her. "So you're trying to get out of it, are you? It seems to me that you ain't no gentleman."

"I very much fear you are right, beautiful Lydia."

"You promised to marry me." Lydia's voice rose shrilly. "If you think you're going to get out of it, you'd best have another little think."

"I made you no such promise," Sin answered in an unmoved voice. "Therefore there is no point in taxing my brains." Smiling, he folded his arms. "However, I am perfectly willing to listen to the details of this imaginary proposal."

"You said that you l-loved me." Her voice breaking, she began to sob with noisy abandon. "You did say that, and you said that you wanted to m-marry me." Her tear-drowned eyes looked at him appealingly. "Sin, don't deny it, darling. Don't break my heart."

"An impossible task." Sin leaned closer, adding in an interested voice, "What, Lydia, real tears? Your performances get better and better. Given the chance, you could be a great actress."

"You swine!" Sniffing, Lydia fumbled in her small red reticule; drawing out a handkerchief, she dabbed at her eyes. "You ain't no good, everybody knows it. All the same, you did promise to marry me, and I ain't letting you wriggle out of it."

"No? Now, let me see. Charles Erley broke your heart, didn't he, and a pretty penny it cost him to mend it. Then there were William Foster and Lord Petworth. How much did it cost them, and, as a matter of interest, how much do you propose that it shall cost me?"

"I . . . I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do." Sin smiled at her startled expression. "I know all about it, love. You'd best abandon the game."

Lydia stepped back and stared at him with malignant eyes. "You think you're clever, don't you?"

"Tolerably so. Cleverer, shall we say, than poor Charles Erley or any of the other fools who have paid to mend your broken heart."

"Curse you," Lydia spit. "You are well-named Lord Sin,

you cold-blooded devil! You've got ice where your heart should be."

"Then you must realize the futility of trying to soften it."

Lydia thrust the handkerchief back into the reticule. "I've not done with you," she shouted, "and don't you think it!" She whirled, her red skirts rustling and swaying as she ran to the door. "I hope you fall in love one day, and that the wench won't have nothing to do with you. Serve you damned well right, it will."

Sin laughed. "A dismal prospect. Should it happen, I will let you know."

Throwing him a burning look of hatred, Lydia wrenched open the door. "Do that, Lord Sin. I'll laugh myself silly. All right, maybe I was trying to do you down, but there's many a poor wench what's broken her heart over you. I hope you do suffer, you deserve it!"

"Oh, what a dreadful girl," Lady Araminta moaned as the door slammed. She patted her hair with quivering fingers. "But dreadful or not, it did seem to me that you were a little too cruel and cutting."

Sin ran exasperated fingers through his black hair. "What would you have had me do, Mother?" he said curtly. "Should I have married her, or perhaps paid her off?"

"Of course not. The girl, by her own admission, was lying. It was simply that I had not thought you could be quite so merciless."

"Nonsense, Mother. Is it merciless to refuse to submit to extortion?"

Lady Araminta shook her head. "No, it would have been wrong to submit, but . . . but I wish you were not quite so hard."

"I see." Sin turned away and walked over to the window. "You do not appear to have a high opinion of me."

Lady Araminta stared at his stiff back in distress, aware that she had hurt him. "Forgive me, my dear," she said softly. "I should not have said that."

"Don't apologize, Mother; you are probably right." Sin turned about to face her. "I am hard, but I don't believe it is in me to be other than I am, or, if it comes to that, to do such a natural thing as falling in love." He shrugged. "You see, I am fully conscious of my shortcomings."

There was the same look in his dark eyes that had often been there when he was a small troubled boy. She had the urge to go to him and put her arms about him, but she could not quite nerve herself to do so. For too many years he had

held emotion at arm's length, and he was quite capable of turning the whole thing off with a laugh and making her feel excessively foolish. "Dearest Sin . . ." She faltered. "What nonsense is this? Of course you are capable of falling in love."

"And you want to see me happy and settled. I know, Mother, you have made that perfectly clear."

Lady Araminta flushed. "And what if I do wish that? Is it wrong to be concerned for you?"

"Not wrong, but there is no need for concern. I am perfectly happy."

"Perhaps, but you could be happier."

"You never give up, do you, Mother?" Sin's smile was sardonic. "Suppose I did marry. Aren't you afraid that my hard and merciless quality might bruise the young lady of my choice?"

Refusing to be drawn, she said firmly, "No, Sin, I am not afraid of that. If you fell in love, you would not be hard."

"No?"

"No. I'll tell you this. If I were a young girl and you loved me, I would run very fast toward you."

His brows rose quizzically. "Mother, are you proposing to me?"

She laughed. "Idiot." Her face sobered. "Do you think Miss Pennywell intends to make trouble?"

"No. She will simply find a new bird for the plucking."

"I am relieved to hear that." Lady Araminta rose to her feet. "You are sure you are not too tired to take me driving?"

Sin shook his head. "After I have bathed and changed, I will be as good as new. Run along and make yourself pretty."

Left alone, Sin wandered restlessly about the room, a frown between his brows. His mother meant well, but he did not care for her constant harping on matrimony. Pausing by the overcrowded sideboard, he picked up a china shepherdess and examined it absently, and then replaced it in its original position beside the simpering shepherd. Why did women keep on so about love and marriage? Several of his acquaintances were married, but it did not seem to him that they were particularly happy. One day, of course, if he desired an heir to carry on the name, it would be necessary to take the plunge, but since he had just passed his twenty-eighth birthday, there was time to spare.

Turning away from contemplation of the future, he strode over to the door. It was time to deliver himself into the capable hands of Melton. He smiled. His valet, secure in the

knowledge that his highly skilled services would be eagerly accepted by any aspiring young man of fashion, had grown increasingly temperamental, and would no doubt be awaiting his coming with a growing sense of grievance.

3



Clad in a delicate primrose-yellow morning gown trimmed with quantities of white silk floss at the square neckline and the wide hem, her soft graying hair attractively arranged beneath a yellow poke bonnet decorated with two green ostrich feathers, one of which climbed the poke while the other curled prettily about the quilted silk of the brim, Lady Araminta Sinclair found that she was not after all enjoying the drive in her son's new sporting curricle. Her mind, freshly alarmed by Lydia Pennywell's claim, now dwelt more persistently than ever upon her twin problems, the necessity of seeing her son happily married and the desirability of detaching him for a time from his London haunts.

Sighing deeply, she settled herself more comfortably against the yielding strawberry-red cushions, reflecting as she did so that their color went ill with her costume; then, dismissing the irrelevancy, she returned to the problem of the handsome and exasperating Sin. At present her son, debonair and rich, was thought to be a great catch, but if his shocking reputation continued to grow, even the most ambitious and persistent of the matchmaking mothers would find themselves daunted. They would have no alternative but to remove their daughters from his scandalous orbit. The removal would be done not so much from choice as from an uneasy conviction that thrusting an innocent daughter into the toils of the wicked Lord Sin would undoubtedly bring down much censure upon their heads.

The curricle swung round a bend in the path, temporarily distracting Lady Araminta. To an onlooker, she thought, it might appear that her son drove in a carelessly dashing style with little regard for his horses, but appearances were deceptive. His lean brown hands were strong and sure on the reins, his touch considerate of the tender mouths of his matched

chestnuts. Sin's appearance was likewise deceptive in that it gave no indication that he had been up all night. His tall black beaver hat was set rakishly on his curly head, and, with his usual flair for the dramatic and the unusual, he had chosen to wear a tailored cream coat; matching riding breeches were tucked into gleaming black boots, his black waistcoat sported several seals at the pocket, and the frills at the breast and the cuffs of his cream silk shirt were piped with black satin. He was a striking figure, Lady Araminta reflected with a mingling of pride and despair, perhaps a little too striking, she thought, noting the feminine heads constantly turned their way.

A crimson-and-white carriage, overtaking them, speeded past to draw up a few yards ahead. The occupant, the Prince of Wales, turned his blond head to smile at them, beckoning them forward with a wave of his jeweled hand. Sin slowed the curricle, bringing it to a halt beside the other vehicle. "Your Highness," he acknowledged. His eyes went to the other figure seated demurely beside the prince. "Your servant, Mrs. Patrick."

The prince, after greeting Lady Araminta with his customary charm, raised his quizzing glass and subjected Sin to a long and careful appraisal. "By gad," he said at last, "only you, Sin, would think to wear something like that. Cream and black, eh? All the dandies will be copying your style." The slight lift of Sin's brows telling him that his remark had not been well received, he added quickly, "Not meaning to imply that you are one of the dandy set, of course."

"Your Highness is gracious." Sin's smile flashed. "Then may I take it that you approve of my attire?"

"Don't I always?" The prince flushed at the mockery in Sin's dark eyes, and his smile faded, a look of petulance settling on his pleasant though heavy features as he reflected discontentedly upon his own attire. Only this morning, when he had decided to honor Mrs. Patrick by taking her for a spin through the park, he had been well pleased with his immaculate fawn breeches and his stylish golden-brown velvet coat, and now here was Lord Sin, making him feel quite shabby and out of mode. Feeling unreasonably deflated, he turned impetuously to his companion. "Well, Mary, what say you? This rascal has really put me in the shade, eh?"

Mary Patrick, a dainty figure in a gown of white sarsenet, a wide-brimmed white straw hat trimmed with pale pink satin ribbons set well back on her blond curls, smiled at him and shook her head reassuringly. "The man does not live who

could put your Highness in the shade," she said in her husky voice. Just for a moment her large blue eyes lingered on Sin with some warmth, but seemingly it was only the usual tribute paid to an attractive man, for when her gaze returned to the prince, there was adoration in the look she gave him.

The prince's smile returned. "Do you hear that, Sin?" he said triumphantly. "Here, at least, is one lady who does not go into a swoon at the sight of you."

"I sincerely hope that applies to the majority of the ladies, your Highness," Sin answered, his grave tone belied by the twinkle in his eyes. "For you'll admit that it would be cursed inconvenient were my path to be littered with swooning females." The twinkle became more pronounced. "But take heart, your Highness, for in the course of time we all must fade."

"Curse you for an insolent dog." Chuckling, the prince lifted his quizzing glass and once more inspected his friend. "Hmm," he went on, "I think I will have my tailor measure me for a similar outfit."

"Not black and cream, I trust. It would not suit your Highness."

Only vaguely aware of the conversation, Lady Araminta covertly studied Mrs. Patrick. She was, she thought, a very beautiful woman. It was rumored that the prince was mad for her, and was even thinking of marriage. At first she had been inclined to discredit this particular rumor, but now, seeing the prince's hand grope for Mrs. Patrick's and the way he turned his head to regard her tenderly, she was not so sure. It was a pity that the young widow's interest did not lie with Sin, and his with her. Mary Patrick was of good family, she did not lack for money, and she was not only beautiful but also eminently practical. She would have made Sin an excellent wife, and her practicality might have had the effect of tempering some of his wildness.

"Well, Lady Sinclair"—the prince's voice brought her out of her thoughts—"are you so bored with our company that you must go off in a deep study?"

Believing she heard a rebuke in his voice, Lady Araminta flushed; then she saw with relief that the prince's blue eyes were smiling. "No indeed, your Highness," she answered quickly. "It is simply that I was lost in admiration of Mrs. Patrick."

She could have said nothing more calculated to please the prince. "You have very good taste, my lady," he answered warmly. Turning to Mrs. Patrick, he touched her cheek

lightly with his finger. "There is no need to be flushing, Mary. In my opinion you deserve the compliment."

"I fear that I do not." Mary smiled at the older woman. "But you are very kind, my lady."

"You see," the prince said, sounding remarkably like an indulgent and loving husband, "there is no end to my Mary's virtues, for she is modesty itself." His eyes sharpening suddenly, he leaned toward Lady Araminta. "But you are looking quite pale, my lady," he said in a concerned voice. "Has your rascal of a son been mistreating you?"

The prince's words, coming so unexpectedly, presented her with a solution to at least one of her problems. Shaking her head, she said in a low voice, "Why, no, your Highness, Sin is always kind and considerate of me. However, I must admit that just lately I have not been feeling quite the thing."

"What!" Sin exclaimed. "You said nothing of this to me, Mother."

Gratified by the expression of concern in Sin's dark eyes, Lady Araminta rushed on hastily. "It is nothing to worry about, I simply need a change of air." She smiled at the prince. "I was hoping to persuade Sin to escort me into the country. That is, of course, if he is willing, and if your Highness can spare him to me for a time."

"But of course he is willing," the prince said without hesitation. "What son would not be? I shall miss him, but a mother's claim must come first."

Lady Araminta was afraid to look at Sin, fearing that he might see through her. "I have a friend residing in Cornwall," she went on boldly, "whom I have not had the pleasure of seeing for some time." She hesitated, and then allowed herself to look fully at Sin. She was ashamed to find that he was regarding her with an expression of unaltered concern. "I . . . I am in great hopes that the Cornish air will do much to revive me," she added in a small voice.

"Then of course you must go, Mother. I will be happy to escort you."

"Of course," the prince echoed. He stretched out a gloved hand and patted Lady Araminta's. "The next time we meet, I hope I see you well and strong."

"Your Highness is most kind."

After the royal carriage had bowled away, Sin did not immediately speak; when he did, it was in the abrupt voice he often used to cover deep anxiety. "Why have you not mentioned your indisposition to me before, Mother?"

Lady Araminta, placing her hand on his arm, was alarmed

to feel the tension of his muscles. "It is nothing serious, darling, I assure you," she said in a soothing voice. "A change of air will put me right in no time."

She smiled as she felt his muscles relax. Dear Sin! How wonderful to know that he cared so deeply. "You are quite sure it is nothing serious, Mother?"

"Oh, yes, dear, quite sure."

"Good," Sin said in a relieved voice. "In that case, perhaps I might prevail upon my cousin to go with you. She would be of far more use to you than I."

Dismayed, she sat up straight in her seat. "Clara is a dear girl," she said in a voice she strove to make firm, "but she is the last one I would choose to accompany me. Please, Sin, I would feel so much safer in your company, and you need not be away from the city for too long. Besides, a change of air will be beneficial for you, too."

"But Clara is the very one to—"

"I will not have her," she interrupted. "If you will not escort me, then I will remain here."

He regarded her grimly for a moment. "I have not said that I will not." A faint smile touched his lips. "So it is to be me or no one, is that what you are telling me?"

"Yes, dear, I am."

"I see." Looking down at his hands, Sin appeared to be studying them intently. "Something tells me that I have a very sly fox for a mother."

"Sin! What on earth do you mean by that?"

He looked up. "Never mind, you shall have your way. But I should warn you that I dislike the country intensely. A few days spent in the clear air and the green of the countryside should find me behaving like a bear with a sore head. I trust you will make allowances."

Aware that he had seen through her, Lady Araminta nevertheless answered him happily. "Oh, I will, dear. Indeed I will. Shall we go home now?"

"Of course." Picking up the reins, Sin sent the horses forward at a slow trot. After driving for a while in silence, he said in a thoughtful voice, "This friend of yours in Cornwall. Have I met her?"

"It's not a her, dear, it's a him."

"Oh?"

"Yes, the Reverend Giles Sedgewick. You have met, though I would imagine, since you were only fourteen years old at the time, you would not remember him too clearly."

She sighed. "Poor dear Giles. His wife died about four years ago."

"Have you known him long?"

"I would say so. Giles and I and Carrie, his wife, used to play together as children."

"Cornwall!" The snapping of Sin's fingers startled her. "The little red house. Yes, Mother, I remember. They had a daughter. A most unpleasant little brat, I thought her."

"Don't be unkind, dear," Lady Araminta rebuked him. "After all, Annaliza was only four years old. I thought her quite enchanting."

"A brat," Sin repeated firmly. "She stuck to me like a bur. I remember now how she used to follow me around. There was just no shaking her."

"I expect she admired you, dear."

"Nonsense, she was a cursed nuisance. How old would she be now?"

Lady Araminta laughed. "All of eighteen. Quite a grown-up young lady."

Sin grunted. "Let us hope she has changed for the better. About the reverend. Is he expecting you?"

Lady Araminta flushed guiltily. "No, not exactly. I haven't communicated with him for some time. I heard of Carrie's death through a mutual friend, and at that time, I wrote to him expressing my sympathy."

"Four years ago? After such neglect, you expect him to receive you with open arms?"

Lady Araminta's flush deepened. "Really, there is no need to be so sarcastic. As for Giles, I know I will always be welcome in his home."

"I hope so, Mother." He looked at her, a hard glint in his eyes. "It would be a pity to ruin your little ruse to lure me from London, wouldn't it?"

"Sin, how can you speak to me in such fashion?" Hoping she sounded convincing, Lady Araminta went on in a tearful voice, "I told you I am not feeling the thing, and surely it cannot be too hard for you to understand that I desire your company."

He ignored the remark. "After such a lack of communication, does it strike you as proper to be journeying to the reverend's home, to say nothing of arriving without warning?"

"With someone else it might not be proper," Lady Araminta said rather breathlessly. Lacing her yellow-gloved fingers together, she directed an appealing look at his averted face. "Giles takes no account of such things, dear, you will see. He

will greet me just as warmly as if we had met the day before."

"You would be well served if he turned you from his door."

"But he will not. You do not know him."

"Has it occurred to you that he may not be alive?"

"Don't Sin!" she said in a horrified voice. "Had he died, I feel certain I would have heard."

"Don't be too sure of that." Sin gave her a brief unsmiling glance. "You will admit to the possibility, I suppose?"

Lady Araminta fell into a dismayed silence, but after a moment she rallied and said spiritedly, "I simply don't believe it. I won't believe it. I would have heard, I tell you. Anyway, I am going. Will you come with me?"

Sin shrugged. "If you feel you can face him after your long neglect, I will escort you."

"Good. I will make it up to him, Sin. I promise."

"I should hope so."

Lady Araminta fell to musing on the strong streak of fair play that was apparent in her son's contradictory nature. He was a puzzle, all right; just when she was ready to give up on him, he came out with something that showed his inherent decency, proving that Lord Sin was by no means as black as he was painted. Rapidly recovering from the chastened mood into which his words had plunged her, she giggled. "Dear Giles," she said lightly, "he is so unworldly. I feel sure he has heard of the notorious Lord Sin, but I doubt very much if he will connect him with Jonathan Sinclair, the boy he met all those years ago. It quite simply would not occur to him."

"Cling to that thought, Mother," Sin said in an amused voice. "If you are wrong, we might both be turned away."

A disturbing thought came to Lady Araminta. She said almost timidly, "You will behave yourself? You must promise me that you will do nothing to shock Giles."

"Buried as we will be, I will have little opportunity to shock anyone, even if I wished to do so."

"But you don't wish it, do you?"

"No, Mother, I do not."

Lady Araminta breathed a sigh of relief. "And you will be courteous to Annaliza?"

Sin frowned impatiently. "Mother, rid your mind of the impression that I am a little boy who must be warned to mind his manners. I really don't think you have ever found me to be lacking in courtesy, have you?"

"No, dear, of course not," Lady Araminta said hastily.

"But there are times when you can . . . can be very intimidating and chilling."

Sin's laugh was a mixture of exasperation and amusement. "Make your mind easy on that score. Though I am forced by gentle blackmail to accompany you on this cursed journey, you will find that I intend to be a model guest and a model son. Does that reassure you?"

Lady Araminta was by no means sure. "If you tell me so, dearest," she said slowly, giving him an uncertain smile, "then naturally I am reassured."

Hearing the note of doubt in her voice, Sin said dryly, "Thank you, Mother. I am relieved to hear you say so."

4



It had been a long and tiring journey, fraught with so many mishaps calculated to fray the temper, that Melton was really beginning to think they were jinxed. Entering the Green Man Inn, Melton, catching sight of his master's thunderous face, remarked with gloomy relish to Liberty Hayes, Lady Sinclair's dour-faced personal maid, "This journey's been enough to try the temper of a saint, Libby, which I assure you Lord Sin ain't. A more impatient man I never did see. He can't even stand still long enough for me to tie his neckcloth."

"You will not call me Libby," the maid answered him on a strong note of disapproval. "I'm Miss Hayes to you, and don't you forget it. And if you know what's good for you, you won't let Lord Sinclair catch you calling him Lord Sin. He won't like it, I promise you."

Looking about the comfortable inn parlor which was reserved for the servants of the gentry, Melton said loftily, "Allow me to know my own master best. I don't need lessons from you on how to handle Lord Sin."

Liberty shrugged her thin shoulders. "Just as you please, clatterbox."

Reddening at the insult, Melton said indignantly, "Now, you look here, I'd have you know I'm the soul of discretion where my work's concerned."

"Nonsense."

"Don't you give me none of that nonsense business, woman. Anyway, 'tis better to be a clatterbox than to have a face like a dried prune." Melton paused for a telling second, noting with satisfaction the sudden flash in the maid's sharp blue eyes. "And there's a person not too far from me," he went on, "what's got a face like that, if you take my meaning, Miss Hayes."

"Crude oaf." Her lips tightly compressed, Liberty turned her attention to her tankard of mulled wine. Melton, despite his show of anger, nourished a secret passion for the cantankerous Liberty Hayes, and he felt a surge of remorse. Falling into a brooding silence, he sipped at his own heartening brew. Then, after a while, generously deciding to forgive her, he chuckled softly.

Liberty looked up quickly. "What are you cackling about, fool?"

Ignoring this further insult, Melton said jovially, "I was thinking of Lord Sin. Did you ever see the like of his face when the wheel came off the barouche for the second time. Fit to explode, he was, and him not wanting to take the journey into Cornwall in the first place. I thought it was proper comical."

"I daresay you did," Liberty said repressively, "but it's not for you to laugh at your betters, Mr. Melton. Lord Sinclair put his trust in the wheelwright, who assured him that the wheel would not work loose again, so I certainly think he was entitled to be enraged." She sniffed contemptuously. "I must say that it was shoddy work on the part of that man."

On a flash of jealousy, Melton answered her roughly. "Seems to me like Lord Sin can't do no wrong with any woman, even you."

Liberty's starched apron crackled as she drew herself stiffly upright. "What are you implying, man?" she said in an ominous voice.

"I'll tell you. If you was to ask me, you got a feeling for his lordship what ain't right and proper."

"How dare you!" All her rigid principles outraged, Liberty stared at him in fierce anger.

"Well," Melton muttered sullenly, "it's like I said. It do seem to me—"

"I don't care to know how your foul mind works," she exclaimed, cutting him off sharply. "I'd have you know, Mr. Melton, that I'm a woman in my early fifties, and you, being likewise in your fifties, did ought to know better than to say such things to a person like myself." She jabbed a finger toward him. "So unless you're wanting a box round the ear, that'll be more than enough from you."

"I was only saying—"

"That will do, Mr. Melton."

Melton, feeling somewhat like a chastened schoolboy, let a few minutes elapse before once more attempting to establish a rapport between himself and the woman of his dreams.

"What about Lady Sinclair, then?" he began, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "Proper fit of the vapors she had, when she was all but thrown into the road."

"And I daresay you found that comical too, Mr. Melton?"

"I did at that. What with her being purple in the face, and screaming fit to bust a body's eardrums, to say nothing of her legs kicking in the air and all her undergarments showing, aye, you might say it was comical."

"Indeed," Liberty said in an icy voice. "I am glad you were amused, Mr. Melton. But I ask you to bear in mind that my lady is gently reared, and consequently, her nerves are extremely sensitive."

"Went on like a proper lunatic, she did, and his lordship scowling and trying to calm her down. Gave me a good laugh, I'll tell you." Smiling, Melton drew a short clay pipe from his pocket and proceeded to fill and light it. "Ah," he went on, blowing a cloud of smoke in the direction of Liberty's offended nostrils, "his lordship ain't going to forget this journey in a hurry. I ask you, what else can happen?"

"Perhaps you will lose that foul pipe," Liberty snapped, "just as you seem to have lost his lordship's caped coat."

The joviality faded from Melton's face at what he considered an underhanded attack. "I can't for the life of me understand how I come to lose it. It ain't like me at all. I've always been proud of doing my job proper." He rubbed the stem of the pipe against his chin, faint alarm in his eyes. "He'll raise the roof when he finds out. That coat was his favorite."

"You could not, I suppose, have forgotten to pack it?"

"Maybe." A gleam of hope lit Melton's small brown eyes. Thoughtfully he scratched at his left ear. "Still, I got a very good memory as a rule."

"When a person is getting on in years, Mr. Melton," Liberty said spitefully, "memories have been known to go back on 'em."

Melton did not respond to the spite. "I reckon you and me's about the same age," he said softly. "Ain't that right?"

Her lips thinning, Liberty made no reply. Melton stared at her for a moment; then, tapping out his pipe against the hearth, he replaced it in his pocket and rose slowly to his feet. "Liberty, my love . . ." He put a plump hand on her thin shoulder. "I must tell you that I admire you greatly. You're a fine woman, and the nature of my feelings is such that I must speak what's in my mind."

Liberty stiffened. Looking at him, her lined face beneath

her frilled and lace-trimmed cap was frankly appalled. "Mr. Melton," she said in a voice she strove to keep steady, "have you gone quite mad? Take your hand away at once! I am not a loose woman, I would have you know, and what's more, I'm up to all your tricks."

"Give us a little kiss, my beauty," Melton said, giving her a tender look.

"Libertine! Get away from me."

Melton threw caution to the winds. "Never," he panted, advancing his face close to hers. "Don't you know I'm on fire with passion for you?"

"Stop!" Liberty followed the word with a piercing scream.

Startled, but his passion undiminished, Melton tried to pull her into his arms. "Don't struggle, my love, that's a good little blossom."

"You vile man. I'll . . ." Words failing her, Liberty snatched her reticule from her lap and dealt him a hard blow on the head. "Monster!" she shrieked.

His head ringing, Melton looked at her with dazed eyes. He had not anticipated this violent reaction to his honorable declaration of love. He had temporarily forgotten his surroundings, and that Lord Sinclair was but one room removed from the servants' parlor. Recovering a little from the blow, he placed a trembling hand on her meager breast. "One kiss," he begged. "Give me but one kiss from your sweet lips."

Liberty struck viciously with the reticule, catching him on the bridge of the nose. Finding his passion somewhat dampened, Melton straightened up, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it. "Why did you do that?" he asked in a hoarse, suffering voice.

Her eyes glaring outrage, Liberty pulled back with such vigor that her chair overturned, depositing her on the floor in a tangle of petticoats, long serviceable drawers, and thin, wildly waving black-clad legs.

Despite the evidence of his smarting nose and throbbing head, Melton could not bring himself to believe that she did not return his love. Looming over her, he forced his lips into a painful smile. "Come, my dove, no more games," he said, catching at a waving leg. "You must not be coy with your man."

Liberty pulled her foot from his grasp. Managing to rise to her knees, she clenched her fist and drove it into his flabby stomach. "There, perhaps that will teach you not to trifle with a respectable woman," she shouted as the moaning Melton doubled over in pain.

"My love," Melton panted reproachfully, clutching at his stomach, "I fear you have done me a grave injury."

Never before in all her years of prim living had her virtue been thus assailed. Losing her head entirely, she picked up the reticule from the floor and began to belabor him with it, her piercing screams rising to the rafters.

The parlor door opened abruptly. "What the devil is going on in here?" Lord Sin, his dark brows meeting in a frowning line, pushed his way through the people who had begun to assemble, and strode into the room. The sight that met his eyes did nothing to cool his temper, which had been steadily rising for the past two hours. It was not enough, he thought bitterly, that they had twice been delayed by that cursed wheel, or that one of the horses had gone lame, and he, refusing to strain the animal further, had walked for an hour through pelting rain before he had come upon somebody who could aid them. Then, to add to his troubles, his mother had taken a chill, and was at this moment shivering before the fire in the guest parlor. In a little while they would be crossing Bodmin Moor, a stretch that the landlord of the inn, with much gloomy shaking of his head, had advised him could present many hazards to the unwary traveler, and now, to top everything off, here was Melton, apparently gone mad and attempting to ravish the prim and respectable Liberty Hayes.

Thrusting the door shut in the curious faces that were trying to peer past him, Sin bounded forward and grasped Melton by the collar. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, shaking the unhappy man. "Have you lost your mind?"

"No, my lord," Melton said in a muffled voice, "it is simply that I am a victim of love."

"A victim of what? Speak up, man!"

Putting a hand to his inflamed nose, Melton said loudly, "A victim of love, my lord."

Taken aback, Sin released his grasp on his valet's collar and turned to survey the woman, who was still on her knees. Silent now, she was attempting to tuck her wispy brown hair beneath her cap. Sin's eyes took in her tightly pursed mouth, the grim set of her jaw, her militant air as she glared at Melton. His gaze returning to the man's battered face, he felt laughter rising in him. "May I take it, Melton," he said in a voice which he strove to keep steady, "that your intentions toward this lady are strictly honorable, or must I assume the worst?"

Melton's watering eyes took on an eager light. "My lord,

my intentions are honorable. It's the truth. I was endeavoring to ask Miss Hayes to marry me."

"You were, Melton?" Sin bit his quivering lip and continued in a creditably even voice, "But the lady appears to be . . . er, unwilling."

Anxious to defend his position, Melton spoke in a breathless rush. "My lord, I had reason to believe she would not be averse. There have been signs."

"Signs, Melton?"

"Yes, my lord. A certain look in her eyes, if you know what I mean. A touching of my arm with hers whenever she had occasion to pass me. And then yesterday, whilst we were seated at a table, she pressed my foot with hers."

"Did she indeed."

"Liar!" Liberty surged to her feet. Smoothing down her rumpled skirts, she said with an attempt at dignity, "Begging your pardon, my lord, and hoping you'll forgive my plain speech, but I would not marry that toad, not were he a prince a thousand times over."

"Well, Melton, you have heard Liberty's answer."

Melton straightened his drooping shoulders and combed back his ruffled sandy hair with his fingers. "Women were deceivers ever, my lord," he said moodily, "and if you'll pardon the presumption, we men'd do well to remember that. Poison, females are, every blamed one of 'em. I hope you'll think on that, my lord."

"Ah, Melton, there speaks an embittered man. But if it makes you feel any happier, I will endeavor to remember your words."

Pushing aside a faint suspicion that his lordship was laughing at him, which would surely be unworthy, Melton said in a hoarse voice, "Thank you, my lord."

The door opened again, and Lady Araminta drifted into the room. Looking at each face in turn, she said in a frail voice, "I heard the uproar. What on earth has been going on?"

"I'll tell you," Liberty said, marching up to her. Towering over the shorter, slighter Lady Araminta, she said in a dramatic voice, "I have been insulted, my lady." She pointed a quivering finger at Melton. "By that unsavory creature."

Lady Araminta blinked at her helplessly. "Oh, dear, have you really? Perhaps, Melton, if you were to apologize, all will be well."

"My lady," Liberty said stiffly, "if you insist upon it, then I shall naturally be forced to accept Melton's apology, for I

would not for the world upset you. But I want you to know that I shall never be able to forget all I have been called upon to endure."

Sin, looking at Melton with a certain sympathy, saw him stiffen and prepare to speak. "Melton," he said hastily, "it takes a big man, a generous man to apologize, especially when he does not believe himself to be at fault."

Overcome by this unexpected ally, Melton drew himself to his full height. "Very true, my lord, and I will prove to you that I can be a big man." His stout figure quivering, he bowed slightly in Liberty's direction. "I beg your pardon, Miss Hayes," he said in a chilly voice, "for having annoyed you with an honest man's declaration of love."

"But how thrilling," Lady Araminta said, looking at the valet with soft eyes. "Did you really declare yourself to Liberty, Melton?"

"I did, my lady. And just like a viper, she turned about and sank her fangs into me."

"Poor Melton," Lady Araminta murmured sympathetically. "How very dreadful for you."

Looking indignantly at her mistress, Liberty said explosively, "Men!" Then, feeling that she had been somewhat tactless, she added in quick apology, "With the exception of yourself, my lord."

"Pray do not leave me out," Sin drawled. "I believe myself to be as worthy of your scorn as the next man."

At a loss, Liberty flushed as she met his smiling eyes. Lord Sinclair was forever saying one thing while she had a suspicion that he meant quite another, and she had never known what to make of him. Turning to Lady Araminta, she said in her prim voice, "Pardon me, my lady, I will go see if your cloak is dry, for I imagine we will be on our way before long." With a last withering look at Melton, she swept from the room.

The crisis within their domestic ranks had caused them to lose much time, and Sin found that an embittered Melton was something of a broken reed. With a distinct diminishing of his sympathy, his temper exacerbated by the man's long face, Sin ordered him harshly to get a hold on himself. A further delay was occasioned by Liberty Hayes, who, after leaving the room, had suffered an attack of hysteria. She was brought out of it by the impatient wife of the innkeeper, who struck her sharply on both cheeks.

With the party on the point of departure, the innkeeper added a further depressing note. Cocking an eye at the lower-

ing sky, he warned that a storm was about to break. "You'll not be wanting to travel the moor under such conditions, my lord," he remarked, rubbing his hands briskly together.

"'Tis better if you and the ladies stay the night. Terrible is the moor in a storm, and the road through is little better than a cattle track. I'd not sleep easy in my bed thinking of you driving off that road and maybe getting lost."

The innkeeper was rosy-cheeked and blue-eyed, his large head crowned with a fluffy mop of gray hair, with his paunch covered by a big white apron; he was a smiling and benevolent figure, and yet for some reason Sin felt an instinctive mistrust. Pulling on his driving gloves, he told himself that the feeling was ridiculous, the man was exactly as he seemed, kindly and concerned. Torn between a desire to stay and a desire to go on, he decided on the latter. "Thank you for your advice, innkeeper," he said, smiling, "but I would prefer to take my chances. There are still some hours of daylight left, and we will soon be at the next village. We will spend the night at a suitable inn, and then it will be on to Pentongally, our destination."

The innkeeper seemed inclined to take offense that his advice had been dismissed. "Have it your own way, my lord," he said in a surly voice. "Though I doubt, with this dirty weather coming up, that you'll even find your way to the next village, let alone an inn." His eyes swept disparagingly over the tall figure in the caped greatcoat, the beaver hat, and the immaculate dark brown suiting that showed beneath the half-open coat. "I see you've taken time to change, my lord," he went on, "but you're not dressed right for this countryside, and that's a fact."

Sin smothered a spasm of irritation. The man sounded like a petulant child. "I regret that neither my attire nor my travel plans meet with your approval," he said in a cool voice. "Should misfortune overtake us, you will have the consolation of knowing that you did your best to prevent it."

The cool voice had the desired effect. "Why, love you, my lord, I'm sure I never meant to offend you," the innkeeper said hastily, his smile returning. "'Twas just my concern for you speaking."

"And I thank you for it," Sin said. "I would like to settle my score now, if you please."

"Certainly, my lord." Taking into consideration the consequence of the travelers, the innkeeper quoted a sum that was rather higher than usual. Receiving into his hand a sum well

over the asked-for amount, he was effusive in his thanks. "My lord," he ventured, "might I ask you something?"

"What is it?" Sin's tone was not encouraging.

"Why would a grand gentleman the likes of yourself be wishing to travel to Pentongally, which is little more than a dimple on the coastline? I know it's none of my business, but I thought I'd ask."

"You are quite right, innkeeper, it is none of your business."

"To be sure." Guileless blue eyes looked into Sin's. "From that part of the coast 'tis a straight run to France, and well known for being the haunt of smugglers."

"Indeed."

"Aye. And the notion did occur to me that you were maybe thinking of picking up some fine French brandy or maybe some silks and laces and other trinkets for your lady mother."

Sin regarded him for a long moment, causing the innkeeper to fidget uneasily. "You may dismiss the notion from your mind, innkeeper," he said in a colorless voice.

"Yes, my lord." The man made a jerky bow; then, with a knowing smile, he bustled away.

Half an hour later, with Lord Sinclair's party on their way, the innkeeper stood in his doorway watching until a bend in the road hid them from his sight. "Well, Tom," he said, turning to the man who stood beside him, "I did my best to get him to stay, but he'd made up his mind, and there was just no holding him." He frowned. "Perhaps it's just as well, for I don't mind telling you I've been feeling uneasy of late. I've an idea this place is getting known for robbery, and that won't do at all. If it comes to that, I never did hold with guests being robbed on the property."

Tom Larson gave him a wide gap-toothed smile, though the smile did not reach his round dark eyes. "You've left out murder, Sam. You ain't forgot that there's been two murders done here, have you?"

"Hold your tongue!" The innkeeper looked furtively over his shoulder. "The murders are on your head and Blake's," he said in a low voice. "I had nothing to do with them."

Tom Larson nodded. "Aye, it was me and Jem Blake that done 'em, right enough. But don't you be forgetting that you helped us bury the bodies. Not only that, you had your share in the money we took off 'em. You made sure of that, eh, Sam?"

"What if I did?" The innkeeper paused, obviously strug-

gling to master his temper. Succeeding, he continued in a smooth voice, "Look here, now, Tom, there's no need for us to be quarreling. As for Lord Sinclair, he's gone, and that's that. Unless, of course, you can think of another way of parting him from his money. If you do, you keep in mind that the arrangement is still the same. I'll be wanting my cut."

"With me and Jem doing all the work, as usual, and you just holding out your fat hand for the boodle. Nice for you, ain't it?"

"You're forgetting something," the innkeeper retorted, giving him a sharp glance. "If it wasn't for me, you and that precious partner of yours would have no place to hole up in when the law's on your heels."

"Don't worry, I ain't forgot. Just don't go getting too greedy, that's all. Likely, if me and Jem tried, we'd find another hidey-hole."

"Don't be too sure of that."

"What about Richard Manford, then? He's one for protecting his men, ain't he?"

"Manford?" The innkeeper laughed harshly. "You really think he'd protect you? You're just a little fish to him, and he'd slit your throat as soon as look at you, coldblooded devil that he is. Especially if he knew you was doing work on the side. Smuggling's his business, not robbery, and he expects his men to stick to that."

"He ain't going to know, unless you tell him," Larson muttered, giving him a sullen look. "Anyway, maybe he ain't so cold-blooded as you think. Tim Bates, who works close to him, told me he's gone and got himself in an uproar over some chit named Annaliza Sedgewick."

"Aye." The innkeeper rubbed a reflective hand over his chin. "Madden told me about the lass. Funny that Manford should just begin to notice her, for it seems they practically grew up together."

"And her a parson's daughter," Larson said in disgust. "Manford'll find himself in the soup, if he don't watch out. It don't pay to fool with no females."

"Manford'll always land on his feet. He's a rum customer at avoiding trouble. Anyway, Larson, my advice to you is not to go to him. He's got a short way with whiners, especially them that don't stick to his precious rules, if you understand my meaning."

Absorbing the threat in the smooth voice, Larson made no reply. Thrusting his hands into his pockets, he pursed his lips and began a tuneless whistling. The innkeeper, staring at the

narrow, swarthy face crowned by a shock of untidy black hair, wondered what was going on in that crafty brain.

Apparently having come to a decision, Larson ceased his whistling. "That Sinclair cove'll have a fat purse on him," he said thoughtfully. "The likes of him never travel with a thin 'un." Straightening from his lounging position, he flashed the gap-toothed smile again. "Me and Jem know the territory like the back of our hands, which I'll wager Sinclair don't. Shouldn't take us long to get ahead of him. We'll take him just beyond Tracey's Knoll. Good place for a trap, that."

The innkeeper nodded. "Good enough," he said slowly, "but mind how you go. That one's no fool."

Larson shrugged. "I been observing the grand m'lord, just like you told me, and I could see that much for myself. Ain't saying he won't be a tough 'un, but me and Jem ain't exactly fools ourselves."

"It don't pay to be too confident, Larson. There's many a swaggerer of your kidney that's had his gizzard slit, taken a revolver blast in the guts, or ended up dangling from Gallows Oak."

"You'd better hope that last don't happen to us, Sam. Any dangling to be done, you'll be right alongside us. Don't you forget that."

The innkeeper watched with narrowed eyes as the man turned and slouched away. For all his boasting, Larson and his partner hadn't a brain between them, although they had cunning in plenty. It was he who was the brains behind the robberies at the inn, and on two occasions Larson and Blake had bungled so badly that it had resulted in the murder of a man and a woman. Frowning, he rubbed a finger across his brow. It made him uneasy when he thought of those two going off on their own. Who knew what the result might be? He could only hope, if things went wrong, that Lord Sinclair would not make the connection between his assailants and the landlord of the Green Man Inn. Another possibility flashed into his mind, chilling him. If Manford came to know of their activities, it would mean the end of them. He would regard it as treachery, and he had a ruthless way of dealing with those he considered enemies. Troubled, shaking his head in doubt, the innkeeper turned and went back into the inn.

5



The coachman narrowed his eyes as he strained to peer through the heavy ground mist. Ahead of him there was what appeared to his inflamed imagination to be an almost solid wall of water. Miserably, wishing that Lord Sinclair had left him behind in London, Carrington huddled lower in the driver's seat and tried to ignore the discomfort of his soggy coat and the rain that dripped from the brim of his hat. Tightening his gloved hands on the reins, he clicked his tongue in a halfhearted attempt to soothe the frightened horses. Not that they were likely to hear him, he thought, through the racket that was going on.

The barouche lurched, causing Carrington to curse as a heavy dribble of water from his hat brim further impeded his vision. He had seen rain in his time, but nothing like this deluge. To add to his troubles, there were the blinding blue-white lightning flashes and the deafening roar of the thunder. Several times the horses, in their panic, had all but dragged the cumbersome barouche from the road. That was, he thought sourly, if you could dignify by the name of road this narrow rutted track that wandered haphazardly across the moor.

Removing his tall hat, Carrington shook it vigorously, and then jammed it back on his head. Cornwall be damned! Give him good old London anytime. At least there a man knew what dangers faced him, familiar dangers with which he knew how to deal. But in this desolate and benighted place, who knew what to expect? So low had his spirits sunk that, while inwardly scoffing at such superstitious nonsense, he found himself thinking uncomfortably of bog demons, goblins, and headless horsemen. Cornwall abounded with such stories, and who was to say they were not the truth?

A sharp rapping on the roof of the barouche brought his

gloomy thoughts to an end. Relieved, he pulled the vehicle with some difficulty to a halt. The door opened, and Lord Sinclair, jumping down into the muddy ankle-deep water, waded toward him. "Is something wrong, my lord?" Carrington shouted, blinking rain from his eyes.

Sin looked up at the huddled figure. "Nothing's wrong," he shouted back. "Get inside, Carrington. I will drive for a while."

Forcing his numbed limbs to respond, Carrington climbed down from his high perch. Joyful at the prospect of relief, he nonetheless thought it his duty to venture a protest. "Tis good of you to think of me, my lord, but it is for me to drive. You'll get soaked in this downpour."

"I imagine I can endure it." Sin smiled at him. "Go on, man, you must be frozen."

"I am that, my lord." His duty done, Carrington turned to the door with alacrity. "Tis gloomy crossing the moor. I couldn't help thinking of headless horsemen and the like."

"If I should see a headless horseman," Sin called as he climbed upward, "I will be sure to let you know."

Conscious of his dripping clothes, Carrington entered the stuffy warmth of the barouche. Inclining his head politely to Lady Sinclair, he was reassured when she smiled at him. "Do sit down, you poor man," she said in a tone of genuine concern. "I am sure you could do with a rest."

"Thank you, my lady." Settling himself with a sigh of relief beside Liberty Hayes, he murmured, "How do, ma'am."

Liberty nodded with her usual air of disdain. Old vinegar-face, Carrington thought. If that's not just like the old biddy to look at me as if I were dirt.

Across from him, Melton moved restlessly. Meeting his gloomy eyes, Carrington wondered what had caused his nose to assume such a vivid hue. Winking at the valet, he closed his eyes in the hope of catching a short nap before he was called upon to resume his perch. Lord Sin was a good sort, he thought drowsily. There were not many who would brave a storm out of consideration for their drivers. For all his sometimes forbidding air, and the tales that circulated about him, he was quite the nicest gentleman Carrington had ever worked for, and the wages he paid were certainly more than the usual pittance.

The rain all but blinding him, Sin guided the horses round a winding turn. Coming once more to a comparatively straight stretch, he relaxed and let the horses out a little. He thought with some amusement of Carrington and his fan-

tasies. Poor devil, he had looked like a drowned rat. Approaching a small rounded hill set to the side of the makeshift road, he was startled to see a horseman appear out of the wet mist and station himself and his animal directly in the path of the barouche. He was followed almost immediately by another horseman. With chins hunched low in raised coat collars, rain pelting, and the ever-present mist wreathing about them, they might have been Carrington's headless horsemen. Sin, however, was not given to fantasy. Even before the command rang out to "stand and deliver," he was already drawing to a halt. Before he had a chance to draw out the pistol he always carried, the first highwayman was upon him. A very large and serviceable pistol was thrust forward menacingly, and above the scarf tied loosely across the lower half of his face, the highwayman's eyes met Sin's. "Get down, you," he ordered, flourishing his weapon.

Seeing no help for it, Sin climbed down. It occurred to him that the men must certainly be amateurs at this particular game, otherwise they could not have failed to notice the give-away groping movement he made beneath his coat. So much the better, he thought grimly.

The second highwayman trotted his horse forward. Wrenching open the door of the barouche, he leaned forward, pistol at the ready, and commanded the occupants to hand over their valuables. "Do as I say," he snarled, "or I'll blow you to hell."

Instant pandemonium reigned. A high, feminine scream caused the highwayman to start violently. Enraged, he bellowed, "Shut up!" The screaming went on unabated.

"Get the screamer out on the road," the first man ordered, his eyes still on Sin. "If she don't shut up, give her a bash on the noggin."

"Out, wench," the other man barked. "Step lively."

Liberty Hayes, her screams reaching an even more nerve-racking pitch, threw herself through the door and fell sprawling in the mud. Dismounting, the highwayman loomed over her. "Stow that row," he bellowed, "or I'll lay you out stiffer'n a corpse."

Her fear seeming to drop from her like a discarded garment, Liberty came to sudden blazing life. Jumping to her feet, she launched herself at the sneering man. "Vermin!" she shrieked, battering at him with her bony fists. "Coward, scum!"

Staggering beneath the surprise attack, the man lost his hold on his weapon. "Tom," he shouted, trying to shield him-

self from the stinging blows, "drop the wench. Drop her, I say!"

"Oh, no you don't." Carrington erupted from the barouche and flung himself upon the man, bearing him to the ground. Melton, following, lost his footing and fell on top of the two struggling figures. In the melee that ensued, the first highwayman lost his caution. Vaulting lightly from his horse, he shouted above the uproar, "On your feet, you lot, or I'll put a bullet through every one of you."

"I think not." The cold metal of Sin's pistol pressed against the back of the man's head. "Drop your weapon, if you please, and turn slowly in my direction."

Furious anger at his own carelessness and the stupidity of his partner, Jem Blake, filled Tom Larson. Slowly his fingers relaxed their tight grip on the pistol, sending it clattering to the ground. "Think you're clever, don't you?" he snarled. "We'd have had you if that fool hadn't got down from his mount."

"Ah, but you also dismounted, which was very remiss of you, my dear fellow." Sin's voice was deliberately taunting. "Still, nothing in this life is ever wasted, or so I am told. Let this be a lesson to you. Never mingle with fools, they'll do you in every time." The pistol exerted pressure. "I must beg you to turn—it is not considered sporting to shoot a man in the back."

"Bloody toff!" His fury overcoming him and crowding reason from his mind, Larson pulled his knife from its leather sheath and wheeled round. The knife flew from his hand, the blade burying itself in Sin's shoulder. At the same moment, the pistol Sin held exploded with a barking roar, the bullet taking Larson in the upper arm. Bleeding profusely, the highwayman managed to gain the saddle just as the horse, with a high whinny of fear, bolted. Dazed by the flashing quickness of the incident, Sin watched as horse and man vanished round a bend in the road.

Jem Blake, alarmed by the departure of his partner, and taking advantage of the lull in the fighting, vaulted aboard his horse in one movement. Bending low in the saddle, he clattered off.

"Let him go," Sin ordered, as the belligerent Carrington leaped forward and grabbed up his master's fallen pistol.

"But, my lord, he . . ." Carrington's voice trailed away. "Very well," he mumbled resentfully. "If you say so, my lord."

"Sin!" Her voice breaking with alarm, Lady Araminta ran toward her son. "Darling, are you badly hurt?"

"It's nothing," Sin said curtly, looking down at the knife still quivering in his shoulder. "Just a bruise, I imagine. The padding in my coat took the full force of the blow." His eyes softened as he took in her white face. "Get back inside, Mother." He looked at the coachman. "Carrington, take over, please."

"Certainly, my lord. I'll get us to our destination as swiftly as possible, never fear."

"I'm sure of it." Sin turned to his valet. "Melton," he said, indicating the knife in his shoulder, "I'm sure this is nothing much, but do you think you could aid me?"

"Yes, my lord." Looking sick, Melton added feebly, "I'll do my best."

"He'll be of no earthly use, my lord," Liberty's dictatorial voice cut in. "I know him of old. If you will get into the carriage, I will tend you."

Melton muttered something, causing Liberty to round on him. "Never mind giving your excuses," she snapped. "If you were even half a man, you'd have done something to prevent this happening. Now, then, if you think you can manage it, be so good as to help his lordship inside."

With Melton's hand on his arm, Sin did not move for a moment. He was highly amused at the picture the others presented. Carrington, seated upon his high perch, blinked anxiously through a mask of mud. His hat, looking as though a ruthless fist had come down heavily on top of it, was crushed low on his brow. Melton, spattered from head to foot, had lost his cravat, and the brilliance of his maltreated nose was subdued by a coating of mud. But of them all, it was Liberty Hayes who presented the most ludicrous appearance. Her bonnet had fallen to her shoulders, dangling from muddied ribbons. Her hair, liberally plastered with mud, stood up in wild peaks and ridges, and at some time during the fight she had pulled up her skirt and petticoat to aid free movement. Long drawers, soaked and black with mud, showed beneath her waistband.

Seeming to take offense at Sin's prolonged stare, Liberty said sharply, "Come, my lord, I wish to look at your shoulder."

Trying to conquer his laughter, Sin nodded. Almost meekly he allowed Melton to assist him inside. Melton, standing aside for Liberty to enter, had his moment of revenge. "Think shame of yourself, woman," he hissed. "What do you mean

by standing there with your drawers showing? I'm glad now that you refused me. It would have embarrassed me sore to take such a shameless slut as my wife."

"You shut your filthy mouth!" Uttering a scandalized shriek, Liberty pulled her skirts free. Beside herself, she doubled her fist and dealt the valet a painful blow in the buttocks. "There. Perhaps that will teach you." Giving the chagrined Melton no chance to reply, she called up to Carrington, "You, there. You'll be using the sense you were born with, I hope. You'll not be starting this vehicle until I've tended his lordship's shoulder. Understand?"

Carrington mumbled something in reply, and Liberty, satisfied that she would be obeyed, climbed hastily into the carriage.

Watching her at work, Melton could not help thinking that whatever Liberty's shortcomings might be, it was at a time like this that she proved her worth. Obeying her snapped-out commands, he looked on with moist admiring eyes as she dealt with Lord Sinclair's bruised shoulder. With part of Lady Sinclair's petticoat she managed to stanch the flow of blood that came from a shallow cut just below the bruise. "Just a nick," she said as she bound the shoulder tightly with the remains of the petticoat. "Tis naught, my lord. Think yourself lucky that the padding in your coat saved you."

After assisting Sin back into his jacket, Liberty thrust her head out of the window and screamed to Carrington to start up. Waiting until the horses plunged forward, she turned her attention to the shivering Lady Araminta. "All is well," she said bracingly. "No need to be fretting, my lady."

"I know, Liberty," Lady Araminta answered the maid in a weak voice. She turned her head and looked at Sin with tear-filled eyes. "My dear boy, I am so ashamed. Here you are suffering great pain, and I can think only of my own feelings. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course, Mother. But you make too much of a bruise and a cut. To listen to you, one would think I was dying."

Lady Araminta shivered. "Don't even say it, Sin." She glanced at the bandage on his shoulder. "You have lost so much blood, and you are alarmingly pale."

"All in your imagination," Sin said, shrugging. "As for the blood, it was a minute amount."

"Indeed it was, my lady," Liberty cut in. "There is nothing at all for you to worry about. Why, I've had worse than that when I've fallen and scraped my knee."

Lady Araminta ventured a smile. "Dear Liberty, you are

such a comfort to me. And I have not yet thanked you for your care of my son."

"Or I, Liberty," Sin said quickly.

Liberty allowed herself a small, tight smile. "You are both very kind."

Emboldened by the smile on the sour visage, Melton said hoarsely, "A wonderful woman is Liberty, my lord."

Instantly Liberty's face straightened. "Melton," she snapped, "I will thank you to call me Miss Hayes. I will not have libertines using my first name."

Melton's jaw dropped. "Libertines? I don't know what you mean, Miss Hayes."

Ignoring him, Liberty turned her attention to herself. Deciding there was nothing she could do to improve her appearance, she pulled up her bonnet, jamming it down on her mud-caked head; she tied the ribbons firmly beneath her sharp chin. Avoiding Melton's ardent glance, she sat down, a grim and unlovely sight.

Sin gritted his teeth as the barouche bumped over a rough stretch of road. Damn! he thought bitterly. With all the mishaps that had occurred on this cursed journey, it had needed only those highwaymen to add the finishing touch. If they could not find an inn, what would the Reverend Giles Sedgewick's thought be when such a motley group turned up on his doorstep? He bandaged, his mother pale and distraught, and the others resembling mud hens. It would not surprise him if the reverend turned the dogs on them. At this last thought, a faint smile touched his lips. He could scarcely blame the man if he did.

Lady Araminta, watching Sin anxiously, was somewhat reassured by his smile. Perhaps Liberty was right after all. He could not be feeling so very ill, not if he could smile. Carrington was making reasonable time now, she further comforted herself, and the rain seemed to be easing off. With any luck, they would soon find an inn. If not . . . Lady Araminta's thoughts broke off in dismay as she thought of her appearance. The hem of her gown was torn and muddy, her hands and face were filthy, and her fragile shoes were soaked. If they could not find an inn and were forced to drive through the night and part of tomorrow, whatever would Giles think of them?

"What is it, Mother?" Sin queried. "You look worried."

"I am." She gave him a wavering smile. "I was thinking of the alarming appearance we will present to Giles."

"My thoughts exactly," Sin answered. "But I don't want

you to worry too much, Mother. We may have to spend the night in the carriage, but as soon as it's daylight, we'll find somewhere." He laughed. "If not, do you suppose your friend the reverend has sufficient charity to welcome us with open arms?"

"Hopefully. But to say the least, he will be somewhat taken aback." Leaning forward, Lady Araminta scrutinized him closely. "My dear boy!" She uttered a helpless laugh. "The elegant Lord Sin has entirely vanished. I doubt that your best friend would recognize you at this moment. A great deal of Liberty's mud has transferred itself to you. You really look quite disgraceful. There is even mud in your eyebrows."

Sin grinned at her. "That must have happened when Liberty cradled me tenderly to her bosom."

"Hush!" Lady Araminta shot an apprehensive look at the maid. "You know how sensitive Liberty is. You must not let her hear you say such things."

"From the gentle snoring drifting my way, there is not much likelihood of that."

Lady Araminta shook her head reprovingly. "Lucky for you that Melton has dropped off. Otherwise, feeling as he does about Liberty, he might challenge you to a duel."

"Or even worse, refuse to valet me." His smile lingering, Sin fell silent. Taking the hint, Lady Araminta made no further attempt at conversation.

Lady Araminta awoke to find that it was broad daylight and the moor behind them. The character of the landscape had altered, and the air that blew into the barouche was laden with a refreshing salty tang. Once or twice, in the several breaks in the huge cliffs that brooded sullenly over the sea, Lady Araminta caught sight of great heaving rollers capped with foam. Unsparked by sunlight, the sea looked gray and dismal, and the noisy shrieking of the gulls held a mournful note. Here and there, looking from the distance like dollhouses, whitewashed cottages were set below the shadows of looming cliffs. Lady Araminta rubbed her stiff neck, caused by a night spent in the carriage. Closing her eyes again, she thought that the one thing she longed for now was a bath and change of clothes.

Half an hour later, as Carrington toolled the vehicle along a cobbled street, Liberty awoke with a start and looked sharply about her. The storm that had plagued them appeared to have neglected this part of the countryside. The village street, lined on either side by picturesque cottages with low thatched roofs, was crowded with people. Even at this early hour, bar-

rows heaped with produce lined the village square. Some had other articles for sale. At one of these barrows a plump girl stood, pale blue ribbons tying her fair hair, her bright red cotton gown a splash of flaunting color. She was holding up a length of lace and cajoling the strolling people, "Make me a bid for this fine piece of lace. Come on, good folk, Debby promises you a bargain!"

Liberty put her head out the window the better to observe the bargain in question. Her expression immediately grew disapproving. Her experienced eyes told her that the girl spoke less than the truth. The lace was more than fine, it was exquisite. No doubt, she thought sourly, it was smuggled across from France by those wicked men who infested the Cornish coast. Rogues! Smugglers! They should all be in prison. Turning her head away from the girl, she watched a towheaded youth slouching indolently along, driving five squealing pigs before him. Liberty's displeasure increased. It would appear that they had arrived at a bad time. It was obviously market day, and the resulting confusion and hubbub could cause a serious delay in their journey.

"Out of the way," Carrington bawled, slowing the barouche almost to a crawl in order to avoid some squawking hens scuttling frantically across the street. "Get along with you, danged blamed chickens."

"Language, Carrington," Liberty called out in sharp rebuke. "I will not t . . ." Her voice trailed away as she noticed that some of the strollers had stopped and were staring at her with expressions of undisguised amusement.

"Will you just look at them." A woman in a flower-printed cotton gown, a green shawl draped about her thin shoulders, stabbed a rude finger in Liberty's direction, then pointed upward at Carrington. "Looks like they've been taking a mud bath." She dissolved into a peal of shrill laughter. "Me dears," she gasped to the interested onlookers, "I've never seen such sights in all me born days."

Stiffening, Liberty stared haughtily at the laughing woman. Wiping her eyes on the corner of her shawl, the woman met Liberty's glare, and promptly went off into another paroxysm. "Oh, my!" She clutched at the shoulder of a burly man standing next to her. "I've never seen the like."

Another hen, clucking dismally, made its agitated way across the narrow street, closely followed by a strutting rooster. Cursing below his breath, Carrington was forced to pull the barouche to a stop. "Can't be helped," he shouted down

to Liberty, "so don't you be spouting any of your poison, woman."

Liberty did not reply. A group of joyfully shrieking children who had been dodging under and around the barrows had now rushed upon the scene to join in the laughter of the adults. "Well, I never," Liberty breathed. Her lips tightly compressed, she was about to draw her head in when her attention focused upon one person in particular, a great lanky girl in breeches, who was, in her opinion, far too old to be playing with the children, and certainly old enough to know better than to go around wearing men's breeches. "Upon my word," she exclaimed, "whatever is the world coming to?"

Lady Araminta, who had awakened, looked apprehensively at the maid. "What is it?" she asked.

Liberty snorted. "Between laughing yokels and that child out there, I'm thoroughly disgusted, my lady."

Lady Araminta, correctly gauging the cause of the laughter, felt her heart sink, but she was moved to curiosity by Liberty's vehemence. Avoiding Sin's eyes, she said quietly, "To what child do you refer?"

"She's just outside the window, my lady. A girl in man's breeches, if you please. Disgraceful."

"But you said she was a child, Liberty," Lady Araminta said, looking puzzled, "so what can it possibly matter?"

"A slip of the tongue," Liberty said primly, "for she is not that young. I would judge her to be all of seventeen, perhaps more."

Amused by Liberty's shocked indignation, Sin rose to his feet. "Point me out this depraved wench, Liberty."

"It's nothing to laugh at, my lord, for you must know that there is enough depravity in this world without adding to it." Liberty's eyes lingered meaningfully on the yawning Melton before turning back to Sin. "That one, my lord," she said, pointing with a lean finger, "the one with the black hair. Do you see her?"

"I do indeed," Sin murmured. The girl in question, with her tangled mop of black hair, her Gypsy-brown face, and her bare muddied feet, was certainly a wild-looking creature. Her wide sherry-colored eyes met his, unusual eyes, fringed with long black lashes, and he felt a slight sense of puzzlement. It seemed to him, looking into those eyes, that there was something familiar about her. Had he met her before? Pondering this last thought, he dismissed it as absurd. He had heard that Gypsies abounded in Cornwall, and the girl looked like a Gypsy, quite possibly was one. The bedding of these

wenches had recently become a popular pastime in the fashionable London circles in which he and his friends moved, but since he was too fastidious to follow the trend, his only real knowledge, gleaned vicariously, was that they were easy. Show them a gold coin, he had heard, and they were more than ready to satisfy even the most startling desires of the flesh. Sin gave the girl a long, penetrating look. Except for those eyes, she was a plain creature who would be all the better for a good scrubbing. As for the breeches she was wearing, not only could one expect almost anything from a member of the wandering tribe, but it was even possible that such garb was respectable in this wild part of the country. As he thought over his criticism of the girl's unwashed state, a faint rueful smile touched his lips. In his present deplorable condition, he was in no position to pass judgment.

The girl, coloring under his bold appraisal, had been troubled by the same sense of familiarity. Now, seeing his smile, her thoughts were scattered as she took immediate exception. Her arching dark brows drawing together in a fierce resentful frown, she said in a clear, carrying voice, "You would think that some people would at least wash themselves, would you not?"

General laughter followed this remark. Sin, feeling the burn of an unusual anger, for he was not easily stirred, his dignity affronted, drew his head in hastily. A pox on the wench, he thought furiously. Let him get his hands on her, and he would forget the fastidiousness that had kept him from such coupling. He would take her body, willing or not, and afterward he would stuff her big mouth with the coins, which he would make sure she earned the hard way, damned if he wouldn't! Slightly surprised at his intense reaction to a skinny Gypsy wench, he slumped back against the cushions.

Seeing the storm signals in her son's face, and noting with alarm the spasmodic clenching of his hands, Lady Araminta said soothingly, "Come, now, dear, why waste time in anger? I have always found that remarks of the ignorant need not be considered." Privately she was amazed that Sin's sometimes chilling dignity could be so easily shattered by a slip of a girl. What on earth had come over him? She took a furtive peep out of the window, and was even more surprised. The bedraggled girl had certainly been impudent, but she could find nothing about her to rouse such an excess of anger. Perhaps, she thought, glancing at Sin again, his wound was troubling him more than he would admit.

Unaware of his mother's concern, Sin, against his will, was

listening intently for that mocking voice. It came. "Well, children, there is nothing more to be seen. Run along, now. Go back to your play."

"Yes, Miss Annaliza," a little girl's piping voice replied, "but ain't you coming too?"

"Not just yet." There was a suggestion of laughter in the clear voice that, for no good reason, caused Sin's anger to flare higher. "Perhaps I will wait and see if the entertainment is to be resumed," the girl added.

"And after that you'll come?" the child persisted. "It's much better when you play with us."

"I'm not sure, Cherry. I might bathe in the inn stream, if Mr. Wilmot will allow it."

"He will. Old Wilmot likes you."

"Thanks you, Cherry. In any case, I rarely ask him. I always sneak over the fence." The note of laughter was more pronounced now. "I think I'll do so now. After all, I must be clean, if only to show some people an example."

By God, Sin fumed, the arrogant bitch was deliberately baiting him. The opening of the door broke in on his heated thoughts. "Well?" he said curtly as Carrington stuck his head in and smiled apologetically. "What is it now?"

"Just discovered the front wheels are out of line, my lord," Carrington answered mournfully. "Must have been the rough going over the moor that did it. Got to get 'em fixed before we go on, otherwise we'll be overturning."

"I see." Sin regarded him with an ominous frown. "And just how long will it take?"

Carrington's eyes slid past Liberty and came to rest on Melton, who gave him a sympathetic wink. "Can't rightly say, my lord," he mumbled, his uneasy glance returning to Sin. "Couple of hours, maybe."

"Nonsense, Carrington. Find someone to help you and cut down the time."

"I'll try, my lord, but they don't seem exactly friendly here."

"Nevertheless, you will not only try, you will do it."

"Sin, please," Lady Araminta's voice intervened, "you must not be so impatient. I am quite sure that Carrington will do his best."

Meeting the steely glint in Lord Sinclair's eyes, Carrington hastily transferred his attention. "I will indeed, my lady. Depend on it."

"Then I will." Lady Araminta smiled at the coachman.

"But in the meantime, we cannot just sit here." She nodded toward the window. "I am not at ease, I fear."

Carrington beamed on her indulgently. "I understand, my lady. There's an inn I noticed, it's just a few doors down. Bunch of Grapes, it's called."

"Splendid." Sighing with relief, Lady Araminta rose to her feet and attempted to smooth her crumpled skirts. "Come along, everybody," she said with forced brightness. "We will first remove some of the grime, and afterward we will have a meal. That should pick up our spirits." She looked uncertainly at her grim-faced son. "It will be better than just sitting here, don't you agree, darling?"

"Undoubtedly, Mother." Looking up, Sin gave her a sudden warm smile. "I'm sorry. I know I can be an impossible boor."

"Nothing of the sort," Lady Araminta protested, touching his cheek gently. "Poor Sin, I know your wound must be troubling you."

Sin shrugged. "I haven't even that excuse, for I can hardly feel it." He glanced at Liberty. "I have no need of the bandage, so I shall remove it."

Liberty sniffed. "I'm sure your lordship knows best."

Helping his mother down to the rough cobbles, steadying her as she stumbled, Sin was acutely conscious of the girl, who, despite her declared intention of bathing, had not yet moved. Once more he met the sherry-colored eyes, and found their expression as mocking as her words had been. Her laughter trailed him to the inn. Just before he entered the door, he looked back and saw her slipping quickly away.

6



Resting his hands on either side of his ample waist, the ruddy-cheeked landlord of the Bunch of Grapes Inn directed a hard blue stare at the four disheveled strangers who had just entered his premises. "Yes," he said abruptly, "what is it you're wanting?"

"What any inn is supposed to provide, I imagine." Sin's drawling voice was cold. "Hospitality, wine, warm food, and last but not least, a hot bath. Is that too much to expect, my good man?"

John Wilmot knew a gentleman when he heard one. But then again, he knew of highwaymen and sundry other scoundrels who could pass for gentlemen. Still, there was something about this one, the dark haughty face, the easy way of standing, the air of command, that made Wilmot suddenly sure he was confronting the real thing. But for all his certainty, the inherent suspicion in his nature made him hesitate. Casting a quick glance at the interested drinkers, who were likewise staring at the strangers, he said in a low voice, "Not too much to expect, sir, if you've got the money to pay." Chilled by the look in the dark eyes regarding him, he rubbed a meaty hand over the shining dome of his bald head. "Have you got the money?" he added uncertainly.

"Naturally." Sin's smile was tight. "I think my purse will stretch that far. If it will ease your mind, landlord, I will pay in advance."

At this offer, Wilmot's truculent manner dropped from him. "Not necessary, sir, not at all." His face split into a grin, showing even and surprisingly white teeth. "Begging your pardon, sir, but it's just that a man can't be too careful these days." The grin vanished and his heavy face grew brooding. "What with scallywags roaming," he went on, "and then you coming in here looking like you do, I thought—"

"I know what you thought," Sin interrupted. "Now, about that bath?" He looked questioning at the man.

Wilmot shuffled his feet in embarrassment. "I'd like to oblige, sir, but the truth is, I've only got the one maid." At Sin's look of surprise, he went on in rapid explanation. "What with it being market day, and to top it off, a fair in the next village, I gave all my workers a day off. They work all the better for you if you're thoughtful of their pleasures."

"I'm sure of it," Sin murmured.

"It's the truth, sir. Anyway, that only leaves me and Jane to manage."

"I'm sorry for you, landlord. But what do you propose we do?"

Wilmot was silent for a moment; then his face brightened. "I daresay Jane can manage a couple of jugs of hot water, but it won't be nearly enough for a bath."

"Obviously," Sin answered, waiting.

"Tell you what, sir. Let the ladies have the hot water, and maybe you'd care to use the inn stream. It's cold but invigorating, if you know what I mean, and most gentlemen prefer it. It's not like you'd be bathing in public. Nothing like it. The stream's on inn property, fenced all round. Nobody else is allowed to use it unless I give them permission."

The Gypsy girl's voice echoed in Sin's ears: "I rarely ask him. I always sneak over the fence." Seeing that the landlord was waiting for a reply, he murmured, "Is that so?"

"Yes, sir." Encouraged by the interest in the dark eyes that were regarding him so intently, Wilmot went on hopefully, "A dip in a cold stream is just the ticket, I always say. Sets a gentleman up fine, and gives him an appetite. I could provide you with towels and soap and anything else you might need."

Sin laughed. "Very well, landlord, I accept. The ladies may have the hot water, I'll take the stream. Provided, of course, that I am not to be disturbed by other guests?"

The landlord's face darkened. "There's Gypsies camped over the next rise," he muttered. "Damned scallywags have been trying to make my stream public property. Wanted to do their washing in it, if you please. And not only that, bathe their filthy brats."

"Oh. Then it would seem I cannot count on being alone?"

"Yes, sir, you can," Wilmot said hastily, "for I've fixed the Gypsies. I've got my dog prowling along the bank, and Bruno's got a short way with Gypsies. Used to be owned by one, and can't abide them for what they done to him."

"An intelligent dog," Sin said, smiling.

Suspecting he was being laughed at, Wilmot said defensively, "Dogs have got long memories, sir. Anyway, like I said, I've fixed 'em. You'll be private, I guarantee it."

I hope not, Sin thought, for I've a score to settle with that Gypsy wench. Aloud he said, "In that case, landlord, if you will call your maid to attend the ladies . . ." He waited until Wilmot, bustling importantly, his voice raised in an impatient shout to the unseen Jane, had ushered the ladies to the back of the beamed room, where a steep staircase wound to the upper quarters, before turning to his valet. "Perhaps you would care to bathe in the stream when I'm finished, Melton," he suggested, "or would you prefer a jug of hot water?"

"If it's all the same," Melton answered, suppressing a shudder, "I'll take the hot water. I don't know if I've told you, my lord, but my last employer, a very fine and considerate gentleman, used to regularly bathe in the stream on his estate." He paused, sighing heavily. "Ended up with terrible pains in his joints, he did."

"Melton," Sin said with a trace of impatience, "you have told me that story so many times that I am growing tired of hearing it."

A snigger from one of the drinkers caused Melton to glare indignantly at the offender. "I'm sure I'm very sorry, my lord," he said, turning wounded eyes on Sin. "Only trying to look out for you, as is my duty. If you'll take my advice, my lord, which you likely won't, you'll settle for a jug of hot water."

"You are quite right, Melton, I won't take your advice. I find the thought of that stream very tempting."

Melton looked at his employer curiously. He knew that look of old, and unless he was very much mistaken, his lordship was up to something. He was certain of it when he saw the gleam in the dark eyes and heard the absentminded "Go and get yourself something to drink, Melton."

Melton was instantly filled with foreboding. No good had ever come of that devilish look, for he had found that trouble nearly always followed in its wake. He was very fond of his lordship, he admitted somewhat grudgingly, who, if he sometimes erred on the strict side, Melton had always found to be just, and sometimes, surprisingly kind and considerate. All the same, there was no denying that he was a terrible rake where the ladies were concerned. They were always hanging about him, and him showing no more than a casual interest. Shameful, it was, Melton thought virtuously. It wouldn't surprise him to know that his lordship had fathered more than

one child. Those society wenches, for all their finery and paint and good manners, were no better than they should be. They were not above lifting their skirts and displaying their private parts, hoping that Lord Sinclair would oblige them, which, he had no doubt, he often did. Consoling himself with the thought that he had seen no ladies about who might possibly stir his master's carnal interest, he said hesitantly, "I'll get myself a drink, my lord, and thank you for the thought. But before I do, can I aid you in any way?"

Amused by the look on the man's face, and guessing more or less accurately at his thoughts, Sin turned away to hide a smile. "Not this time," he answered. "In this instance, I can aid myself very well."

"Yes, my lord," Melton said gloomily, "if you say so."

Clad in an overlarge robe of blue flannel borrowed from the landlord, Sin approached the stream. Even before he reached it, he heard a voice singing, accompanied by the splashing of water and the excited barking of a dog. He smiled to himself. The Gypsy, as he had hoped, had ignored Wilmot's law and slipped over the fence. Forgetting that he could scarcely be heard above the uproar, he moved nearer, careful to make no sound that might betray his presence. Stationing himself behind a convenient stand of tall bushes, he looked first at the dog, a large brown-and-white animal of nondescript appearance and uncertain breed. Bruno, giving the lie to his master, his forepaws flopping absurdly, was rolling over and over along the grassy bank, his attitude one of extreme amiability. So much for the ferocious watchdog, Sin thought with a spurt of amusement, turning his attention to the girl.

Calling to the dog, who blithely ignored her coaxing voice, she rose partially from the water. Wet hair clung to her face in little ragged wisps, the longer length of it adhering to her tawny throat and shoulders like black snakes. Shivering, hugging her arms beneath her firm thrusting breasts, she called once more to the dog. "Bruno, come into the water. Here, boy!"

His red tongue lolling from his mouth, his sides heaving excitedly, the dog stopped his play and cocked a bright eye in her direction. He seemed to be debating whether to continue with his rolling or to join her. Making up his mind, he bounded forward and dived in with a tremendous splash. Swimming to the head of the stream, he commenced with much growling to worry at the long weeds that trailed in the water.

Sin's eyes returned with fascination to the girl. With rising excitement he stared at her breasts, imagining how those pink nipples, made prominent by the chill of the water, would feel beneath his lips and his seeking tongue. He gripped the towel hard as she rose to her feet. Swaying slightly, she waded to the bank and grabbed up a bar of soap. Returning to the middle of the stream, she proceeded to lather herself thoroughly.

Looking on with appreciation, Sin realized that she was not skinny, as he had at first thought her. It was true that her tanned body, with the exception of those full and exciting breasts, was slight, but it was exquisitely formed. His eyes traveled lower, lingered, the heat inside him growing. Exercising self-control, he reluctantly lifted his gaze from that mysterious shadowing that protected her womanhood, and concentrated instead on her face. Oval, delicate-featured, the sherry-colored eyes glowing like jewels, her face at this moment had a certain beauty that denied the label of "plain" he had previously pinned on her.

Frowning, Sin fought against the unwelcome conviction that came to him then. Gypsy she might be, but he could not go through with his plan. Despite the evidence of womanhood, she appeared to him to be touchingly young, innocent, too, as she frisked with the dog, which had now swum to her side. Innocent? He jeered at himself. It was far more likely that she was a practiced slut. He had heard that Gypsy girls were trained from an early age in all the erotic arts that pleased men, and doubtless this one was no exception. All the same, he could not do it.

Laughing, losing her footing under the animal's boisterous force, the girl fell backward, disappearing. Breaking the surface a moment later, her long black hair floating like seaweed upon the water, her breasts bobbing, she was still laughing. "Back, Bruno," she cried out breathlessly. "Don't be so rough."

Sin removed the robe and flung it to one side. If he could not bring himself to take her body, he could at least give the impudent brat a well-deserved scare. Emerging from behind the bushes, he ran naked to the water's edge. Just before he plunged in, he had the satisfaction of seeing the sherry-colored eyes go wide with shock.

Annaliza Sedgewick cried out in fear as she fought the strong fingers that had fastened like a vise about her ankle. Dragged beneath the water, she managed to open her smarting eyes wide enough to see the shadowy form of her as-

sailant, the lean weaving length of his naked body, the dark floating hair, the white flash of his teeth, and even in her terrified certainty that she was about to be murdered, she knew him. It was the man from the barouche, the muddy man, as she had dubbed him to herself. She had seen him somewhere before, but where, and why was he trying to kill her?

The fingers tightened still more, and all coherent thought fled Annaliza's mind. Her lungs burning, gasping for breath, she fought him savagely, her terror giving her the added strength to enable her to drag her ankle from his grasp. Bubbles rose as he laughed and attempted to seize her again. She kicked out viciously, her movements seeming to have no power beneath the water; then, as she was tumbled helplessly against him, she tore at his flesh with her nails. Free at last, her heart thundering with panic, she shot upward into the blessed light and air. Blindly, her arms flailing the water, she floundered to the bank. Bruno, who had abandoned his swimming, barked an eager greeting as she approached.

Annaliza screamed as a hard hand seized her again, shaking her. "Fool!" a deep voice hissed. "What's the matter with you?"

What was the matter with her? It was too much! Losing her head completely, Annaliza flung herself backward, clawing at the hand on her arm and doing her best to capsize him. "You get away from me," she screamed, "you madman, you murderer!" Water swirling about her hips, she managed to swing round and aim her fingernails at his eyes.

"Be still." Grabbing at her wrists, Sin forced her down until only her head showed. Petrified, she stared at him for a moment, and then she came to life. Surprised at the strength in the fragile girl, Sin was forced to use all his strength to subdue her madly plunging body. At last, feeling her go limp, he dragged her through the struggle-churned water and threw her roughly on the bank. She was not unconscious, as he had thought; she was fully alert, her wide eyes staring into his. "Wh-what are you going to do with me?" Her words were choked and difficult.

"Do?" Sin crouched over her, water from his hair dripping on her blanched face. The dog, not quite certain what was required of him, rose, sniffed uneasily at them both, and gave a soft tentative growl. Abruptly Sin lost his temper. Putting his hand to his smarting, bleeding face, he roared at her, "Are you insane, and what the devil do you mean by calling me a murderer? Damn you for an evil-tempered Gypsy bitch!"

Gypsy? Annaliza's mind absorbed the word, but made

nothing of it for the moment. "You dragged me under," she accused him in a fierce, trembling voice. "Y-you were trying to kill me."

As abruptly as it had come, Sin's rage left him. "If I had wanted to kill you," he said coldly, "you may be sure that I would have succeeded. There is a difference between a ducking, which you richly deserved for your infernal insolence, and an attempt on your life."

"I don't believe you. I almost died down there!"

"Your imagination does you credit. I apologize for frightening you, but you were under only a couple of seconds."

Seconds? It had seemed to her like hours. Uncertain now, but still stubborn, she said shakily, "You were trying to kill me, I know you were."

Shrugging, Sin sat back. "Believe what you like, then. It is a matter of indifference to me, Gypsy."

There it was, that word again. Did he really believe her to be a Gypsy? As she stared into the handsome, brooding face, Annaliza's fear ebbed rapidly away. As he had said, he could have killed her easily, if that had been his intention. After all, she had been ducked many times before, and it was not like her to lose her head so completely. It was the unexpected sight of him, she defended herself, the startling grab he made for her ankle. Anyone would have believed the worst.

"Feeling better now?" His low voice drawled the words sarcastically. He leaned over her again, his hand sweeping her wet hair away from her eyes. "Well, what's the verdict? Have you judged me innocent, or am I still a would-be-murderer?" His hand dropped to her shoulder and lingered there.

The color burning in her face, thrilling unexpectedly to his touch, she turned her face away without answering. Sick and ashamed, she became aware of her own nakedness, of his, something she had not thought of in the grip of her fear. She wanted to leap up and run from him, to hide herself from those disturbing midnight-dark eyes. His touch made her feel strange, gave her wanton thoughts that she had never had before. Her limbs twitched feebly as she made an effort to rise. Then, as his hand pushed her back again, with a curt admonition to "Rest, get over your scare," she subsided. In any case, what did it matter? It was too late to play the coy and outraged maiden, since he had already seen all of her. If she tried, she had the feeling that he would only laugh at her. Unable to resist the temptation, she swept her gaze quickly over his lean virile body and lingered for a heart-throbbing

second on the proof of his manhood. She looked quickly away. Adam, she thought—he was Adam, before a bite from the forbidden fruit had made him conscious of his own nakedness. The patent stupidity of this last thought brought the scalding color back into her cheeks. Adam? Nonsense. She must be mad to indulge in such strange whimsies. And yet there was something about this man, something quite apart from his breathtaking looks, a different and exciting aura that he gave out. She looked at his hair, already beginning to spring back into loosely curling tendrils, and she could not help the sigh that escaped her.

"Well?" Sin said with a trace of impatience. "Why are you looking at me so strangely. Is your imagination working overtime again?"

Her eyes dropped. She could only pray that he would not guess the direction her imagination had taken. She should get up and leave, for she shuddered to think what her father would say if he could see her now, but she had lost the desire to move. Shameless and immodest, she castigated herself, and yet at this moment she could not bring herself to care. Again the feeling that she should know him teased at her mind, but instantly she dismissed it. Surely, she reasoned, if she had seen this man with the face of a dark brooding angel before, she would have remembered? The agitated fluttering inside her increasing, she concentrated instead on the name he had called her, Gypsy. If he had meant to insult her, he had missed the mark. She was pleased and flattered that he should think her a member of a fraternity whom she had always considered to be glamorous and exciting. She thought of Ria, a young Gypsy girl who was forever coming to the house in a determined effort to sell her various articles. Ria, beautiful and exotic, her earlobes weighted down with heavy silver loops, her wrists jangling with bright bracelets, had a way of smiling, a certain way of slanting her eyes, that gave her a feline quality. Thinking of her, Annaliza unconsciously smiled and narrowed her eyes in the same way.

Observing her closely, Sin wondered how he could have been so mistaken. The innocent quality that had caused him to hesitate had vanished with her smile, and the look in her eyes was definitely brazen. "Ah," he said mockingly, "you are yourself again."

Staring into his dark eyes, Annaliza stiffened. Without warning, a name had jumped into her mind. She knew now where she had seen him before. London, the royal procession, Lord Sin. Her mind reeled; the man bending over her was

Lord Sin. She did not ask herself what he was doing here in this remote spot; she only knew that her fear was back, stronger than ever, though with a different cause. All her foolish fantasies were swept away on a surge of loathing. Loathing for this man, with his terrible and no doubt well-deserved reputation, and for herself, because for a few mad moments she had succumbed to the vital and forceful attraction of his presence. Unconcerned, the moral issues which had been drilled into her from early childhood completely forgotten, she had laid naked before him, playing Eve to his Adam. Oh, God! she cried inwardly. How could I have so far forgotten myself? Frantic now to get away, she attempted to sit up, only to be forced down again by lean brown hands that were once more holding her captive.

The touch of her smooth tawny flesh and the sight of her beautiful heaving breasts fired Sin's blood and swept the last of his doubts away. Her bold eyes, her seductive smile, a smile that had certainly held nothing of innocence, told him she was more than willing. He was not even particularly surprised by her sudden and violent resistance. Firmly he subdued her struggling body. He expected her to put up a token fight; it was all part of the act, and there were some females, no matter how eager they might be to couple, who felt this to be incumbent upon them, but he was too well-versed in their wiles not to know an invitation when he saw one. "Be still, Gypsy," he said softly. "You have fought enough to convince me you are unwilling." He smiled. "But we know differently, do we not?"

"No, you don't understand," Annaliza cried out wildly. "If you think I'm going to let you—"

"Think of the gold coins you will earn," he interrupted, "the pretty baubles you will be able to buy to delight your sweetheart. That should please you."

Please her? Annaliza heard his words in stunned disbelief. Obviously her previous unconcern had encouraged him in the conclusion that she was a whore. In fear and self-shame, she reared up desperately. "Let me go. Take your cursed hands away from me!"

"Not yet. You must earn those coins." Laughing, Sin covered her body with his own. The flame inside him leaped higher as he felt the crushed softness of her breasts. "Let us have done with this tiresome pretense," he said roughly. "Enough is enough." Consumed with the gathering force of his desire, he lowered his head and took her lips in a hard, bruising kiss.

Annaliza gasped as his mouth left hers and his tongue began teasing at her nipples. Momentarily frozen, her eyes wide with horror, she tried to deny the fiery thrill of his touch. Tears filled her eyes. Perhaps at heart she was the whore he thought her. If she were not, then how could she feel like this, fighting him and yet secretly wanting him to go on? Filled with despair and frantic to prove herself wrong, she belabored him with her clenched fists. "Don't. You must stop!"

Sin was deaf to her voice; her blows registered only as a minor annoyance, his whole being concentrated on the gratifying of his desire. His lips moved lower, searching out vulnerable places, lower still. The wild rearing of her body when he reached the ultimate place only served to further inflame him. His breathing labored, the tart taste of her in his mouth, he parted her thighs urgently. Now, he thought, now! Poised above her, he made his entry with more force than he had intended.

Annaliza bit back a scream as pain jabbed searingly. Oh, God, what had he done? Surely he had torn her apart. Fresh tears jetting from her eyes, her teeth gritted together, she fought him grimly and silently. It was to no avail. He was too strong for her; there was nothing she could do to stop him now. With a sense of surprise she realized that the pain had vanished, only a small discomfort remained, and even that was subdued by the waves of sensation sweeping over her. Her traitor body burned now with the same urgency as his; there was a melting, a quickening inside her. A moan broke from her lips as his pace increased. Her heels drummed the earth, her hands clung to his broad shoulders as his body battered hers with savage force. The sensation was exquisite but almost unbearable. She cried out, the cords in her throat straining. It was at that moment that Sin's release came, achieving a perfect completion with her own.

Mindless, Annaliza lay there. Only when he gently withdrew from her did she come back to herself. Looking into his smiling, confident eyes, the full horror of the situation struck her like a blow from a giant fist. She had fought valiantly at first, but in the end his superior strength and her own body had betrayed her. In a flood of hungry desire such as she had never thought to know, she had clung to him, encouraging him with thrusting movements that matched his own. Filled with him, glorying in it, she had forgotten who and what she was. She looked about her, unable to believe that everything was the same when she herself was so changed. The birds

sang, the stream rippled, the weeping willows still bent over and trailed their long fronds on the water. The dog, unconcerned, slept peacefully, his head between his paws. In bitter shame she forced herself to look at the man who had created such an upheaval in her peaceful and uneventful life. "I know who you are," she cried, "and you will regret what you have done today, I promise you that!"

Grand and vengeful words from a Gypsy lass, Sin thought, but to what purpose? If his friends' boastful tales were to be believed—and why should they lie?—a Gypsy girl's very upbringing was a training to accept and respond to the act of passion. This one, of course, had been a virgin, and for that reason he could not help a twinge of shame. And yet, he reasoned irritably, why should he feel ashamed? If it had not been he, it would very soon have been another. She was ripe for love, made for it. He thought of the way her struggles had melted into passionate response, the avid way she had thrust hard against him in a silent begging for more. She had been the wild mare to his plunging stallion, and now she dared to look at him with accusing, ice-cold eyes. "So you know who I am, do you?" He spoke absently, waiting for her reaction.

Annaliza's hands clenched tightly together. It was plain that he did not believe her. "Yes, I do." Anger mingled with the accusation in her eyes, and he was not to know that it was as much for herself as for him. "You are Lord Sinclair," she went on triumphantly, "better known as Lord Sin. With good reason, as I know to my cost."

"To your cost?" Sin smiled mockingly. "Forgive me if I was mistaken, but it did seem to me that you were more than willing."

"How dare you say that!" she cried out in a shaking voice. "You know that you took advantage of m-me, that you . . . you forced me."

"Why, so I did, at first." Sin looked at her for a long thoughtful moment. "Might I suggest that you learn to know yourself. You will find, perhaps not altogether to your surprise, that you are a remarkably fiery and passionate young person."

"No, don't say that. It's not true."

Surprised at the note of hysteria in her voice, Sin shrugged. "As you please, of course." Rising, he picked up the blue flannel robe and thrust his arms into it. "At any rate, I do not propose to argue the matter. I am staying at the inn. If you will come there later, I will pay you." He turned away.

Annaliza had no words. With burning eyes she stared after his lazily strolling figure until he disappeared. Her guilt and shame fled, to be replaced by an implacable hatred for the man who had made her see something in herself that she did not care to see, who, after flinging the final insult at her, had walked casually away as though nothing untoward had taken place.

Annaliza brushed away a leaf that had drifted down and settled on her face. Her thoughts went to Richard Manford, wondering if she could give as passionately and as freely to him as she had given to Lord Sin? The answer that came disturbed and shocked her. No, she could not. She could never feel that way for him. Poor Richard, who was always so good and kind. And yet she loved Richard, or at least she had almost convinced herself she did. But he did not stir her; even his kisses roused no particular response. So it would seem that the newly born fire and passion were all for the man who had raped her, whose dark sensuous glance had stirred strange and turbulent feelings. As she faced the painful truth, her hatred, rather than diminishing, increased to gigantic proportions. She was her own woman, she assured herself fiercely; she would be in bondage to no man.

Trying her best to dismiss him, Annaliza climbed shakily to her feet. Dressing herself, she found that she could not stop thinking about him. "I hate you," she said loudly, startling a small coterie of birds. She buttoned her shirt with quick, nervous movements. "God damn you, Lord Sin, but how I would like to kill you. I will, if I ever get the chance!"

Bruno, awakening, stretched himself lazily. Something of the girl's agitation must have communicated itself, for he gave vent to a mournful howl and then began to bark loudly and uneasily.



Comfortable in the gently swaying barouche, Lady Araminta sighed with pleasure as they approached the tiny village of Pentongally, bringing them within sight of the sea once more. Although the light had strengthened considerably, the lingering remnants of dawn still lay across the water, touching the spread sails of fishing boats and streaking the pellucid green of the foam-capped waves with streamers of orange and gold. Gulls, uttering their mournful monotonous cries, bobbed on the waves, their gray feathers tinged with the same magical hue.

Dawn, a delightful phenomenon of nature, Lady Araminta thought, drawing in a deep breath of the salt-leaden air. Turning her head, she looked at the two soundly sleeping servants, and then at her son, who was staring at nothing. Her sense of well-being evaporated. Sin appeared to have changed since yesterday afternoon. Always inclined to be slightly taciturn, he was now more so than ever. Sometimes, although he was invariably kind and considerate, his rapidly changing moods and his long silences made her feel very uncomfortable. He was like his dead father, who had quite often made her feel the same. She had not understood her husband, and she did not understand her son. And yet Sin must have inherited something of her own bright and uncomplicated nature—at least, she hoped so. If only he would fall in love, get married, she had the hopeful feeling that it would draw him out of himself and make the world of difference. Her eyes dwelt reflectively on his dark profile. He was so handsome, and once again he took after his father in this, who had had the same striking looks. As she thought of her husband, a flush stung Lady Araminta's cheeks. It was true that she had not understood him, but she had loved him dearly, and even though seventeen years had passed since his un-

timely death in a hunting accident, she had never ceased to mourn him. Theirs had been an arranged marriage, and she had always known that she was not the right woman for Christopher. He had needed a challenge, not her meek and unexciting adoration that gave in to his strong and dominant personality on every issue. In short, he had needed a woman he could love, not merely tolerate. The same thing must not happen to Sin. If he were to be truly happy, it was imperative that he find the right one.

Sin changed position. Drawing aside the curtain, he looked at the passing scenery without interest. Again Lady Araminta was conscious of the change in him, and in her mind she dated the change from the appearance of the impudent and grubby girl who had so shocked Liberty with her masculine dress. But of course she was being ridiculous, she thought, her fingers fidgeting with her beaded reticule. Why should the girl have upset Sin? Perhaps she had bruised his dignity slightly, but certainly no more than that. In any case, it was not like her aloof son to dwell on such trivialities. It might simply be that his wound was troubling him after all, or that something had happened which he was not telling her. "Sin, dear," she began brightly, determined to banish conjecture and gloom, "I am certainly glad we have left that dreadful inn behind, aren't you?" She made a wry face. "It was too bad that we found ourselves too tired to resume our journey. I found that the beds were very lumpy and that I slept little. Consequently, we might just as well have gone on."

Sin's thoughts had been occupied with the Gypsy girl. There had been something about her, a fire and passion unmatched by any other woman he had known. It annoyed him intensely that he could not think of her without feeling a rising excitement. A further cause of annoyance was the unfamiliar feeling of shame the wench had managed to arouse in him. The shame had not been soothed when she had failed to come to the inn to collect her money. Why keep thinking of her? he asked himself irritably. Why allow her to linger so uncomfortably and excitingly in his thoughts? She was nothing but a Gypsy brat! Becoming aware that his mother was speaking, he said shortly, "Your pardon. What were you saying?"

"It was really nothing, Sin. I was remarking that I feel very tired and jaded."

"I hope you did not mind setting out from the inn so early?"

"Oh, no, dear. I disliked the accommodation, and I was glad to get away."

"Good." Sin gave her an absent smile. "Put your head back and try to get some sleep."

Lady Araminta gave him a sparkling glance. "Oh, no, dear, I hardly think so."

"But why not? If nothing else, it will make this infernal journey pass swiftly."

She laughed. "The journey has already passed. A few more minutes will bring us to the Giles's home."

"Really?" Sin's eyebrows rose in surprise. "I had no idea we were so near."

"But we are, dear. We have just passed through the village of Pentongally, sometimes called 'the village with its feet in the sea.' Carrington has followed my directions so beautifully that one would almost think he had been here before."

"If he has," Sin murmured, "I'm sorry for the poor fellow."

"Now, dear!" Lady Araminta patted his hand admonishingly. "The change will do you good. Much better for you than associating with all those dreadful people in London."

Sin's eyes showed a glint of amusement. "You mean women, don't you, Mother?"

Lady Araminta flushed. "And if I do, Sin, you will admit that you have given me little cause to think differently. But let's not talk of unpleasant things, dearest. You must promise me that you will not be difficult." She looked at him wistfully. "Please, Sin!"

"Make your mind easy, Mother. I will be the perfect gentleman."

"Will you really, dear?"

At her dubious tone, Sin laughed outright. "Are you thinking that it will be the first time?"

"Oh, no, dear. You are always a perfect gentleman."

"Liar." Sin took her hand and squeezed it gently. "But I do promise to behave myself, even if I have no taste for country living. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes. But don't make it sound as if you are here for the rest of your life. It will be for only a short time."

"I know that. I will contain my impatience to be gone."

"I'm glad." With a sudden spurt of anxiety Lady Araminta said quickly, "How is your shoulder? Does it pain you very much?"

"Just a vague ache. I told you it was nothing."

It took more than Lady Araminta's optimistic few minutes

before Carrington reached his destination. Giving the lie to her praise of him, he took several wrong turnings. The beauty of the morning had vanished, and the innocent blue of the sky had taken on a sullen hue with gathering storm clouds before he finally drew up again. To make matters worse, Carrington discovered that the barouche was too wide to go along the narrow lane that led to the reverend's home. With the good-natured sarcasm of the now wide-awake Melton in his ears, combined with Liberty's acid remarks, he climbed down and approached the door. "Barouche too wide to go up the lane, my lord," he said in a voice of doom. "Looks like we'll have to walk."

"If we must, we must." Sin glanced at Lady Araminta's shoes. "For your sake, Mother, I hope it isn't far. You are scarcely shod for walking."

Lady Araminta looked dismayed. "It is almost a mile to the house," she said in a faint voice. "I had forgotten that." As Sin looked at her grave-faced, she added hastily, "Yes, dear, I know I should have put on more sensible shoes."

Once again Lady Araminta had been too optimistic. It was exactly a mile and a half before the house hove into view, and by that time she was limping. "Look," she said, pointing to the square half-timbered building with its dimly shining mullioned windows. "It is not a large house, but quite charming, and, as I remember, very comfortable."

"Charming, as you say." With the others trailing behind him, Sin led the way along a short paved path. Raising the iron knocker on the dark oak-paneled door, he banged twice.

The door opened so abruptly that Sin, who was leaning against the panel, was almost desposited in the hall.

"Good morning to you." A tall, thin man with stooped shoulders, ruffled gray hair, and a pleasant expression stood framed in the doorway. The expression in the mild blue eyes changed to one of concern. "You all look so tired," he went on. "How may I help you?"

Lady Araminta, after the uneasy night spent at the inn, was conscious of not looking her best. "Giles," she said with an embarrassed laugh, "don't you know me?"

The Reverend Sedgewick, starting, peered more intently with his shortsighted eyes. "Araminta?" he said doubtfully. "Is it you?"

"It is indeed, Giles, and I am so very happy to see you." Lady Araminta took her son's arm. She said proudly, "And this is my son, Jonathan, Lord Sinclair."

"Upon my soul, but this is a pleasant surprise." Beaming,

the reverend rubbed his thin hands together. "Little Jonathan." He chuckled. "Not so little now, eh?"

"No, sir," Sin answered.

"Well, you've grown into a fine young man." Recovering from his surprise, he stepped back. "But what am I thinking of, to keep you waiting on the doorstep. Come in, come in. Araminta, it's really wonderful to see you. I'm only sorry my daughter is not here to share in the surprise. She always had a fancy for Jonathan, as you know." He chuckled again. "Remember the way she used to tag after him, Araminta, and she was no bigger than a minute?"

With a look at Sin's unmoved face, Lady Araminta said fondly, "I remember, Giles. But where is Annaliza?"

"She has been staying with friends. But no matter, she should be home sometime tonight." The old reverend frowned slightly. "It is possible that she might stop off to talk with another friend, but she'll be here."

Wondering at the worry she sensed in her old friend, Lady Araminta allowed him to take her arm and lead her forward.



His hands clasped about his knees, Richard Manford sat motionless on the projecting rock by the sea's edge. His light blue eyes, looking out over the sea, absorbed the splendor of the setting sun. This was his favorite time of day, when the earth was slowly swallowed by the darkness, and when, so it seemed to him, there was a hush, a waiting, a pause in life. The waves, rolling lazily inward, gathering strength as they came, frothed over his bare feet, and rising, drenched him in a delicate silver mist of spray. Saturated but content, he fell into a familiar fantasy. He was one man alone in a world that was shared only by the sea and the circling, screaming gulls. There was nothing he could not do, he was all-powerful. In time, he would make the world over to his own specifications. It should be peopled only by the strong. The weak, the humble, the gentle people, would have no place in it. The spray, washing his face again, broke in on his reverie. He felt an almost sensuous pleasure as he tasted on his lips the salty flavor of the sea.

A stranger meeting and talking to Richard Manford for the first time would have been deceived by the soft lilt of his voice, his good-natured smile, and the almost vague look in the light eyes. He would no doubt be thought of by a stranger as one of the gentle ones whom he so despised. A nice man, certainly, but a bit of a dreamer, and totally unfitted for the hard game of life. Knowing how he appeared on first meeting, Richard nourished the impression, wearing the identity given to him like a protecting cloak.

The gang of smugglers, whose leader he was, knew another Richard Manford. A man who was hard, shrewd, ruthless, and greedy, who punished big and small mistakes alike with the same terrifying and brutal ferocity. More than once, in a fit of senseless brutality, he had killed for the sheer pleasure

of it, and had afterward consigned the bodies of his unfortunate comrades to the sea. The sea, receiving the bodies and sinking them without trace, reassured him in his belief in his own omnipotence and left him with that anonymity that was his greatest safeguard against prying strangers.

Thinking of the men he led, Manford picked up a pebble and skimmed it over the sea. All of them had been carefully picked by him, and all had something to hide. He held the key to their secrets and he knew they would never leave him, for as much as they feared and hated him, they feared even more the exposure of that dark corner in their lives. He dealt in scared men, greedy men, men on the run, and this knowledge was a source of great satisfaction to him. He walked among them in arrogance, his head held proudly high. He was safe from a stab in the back or from anything else they might possibly dream up. From the first, he had made it quite clear that he kept a file on every man under his command. That file, its hiding place known only to his man of law, would be opened and read, should he die a violent death, or even one that appeared to be an accident. He left nothing to chance, and the only guarantee he would give his men was the vague promise that the files would be destroyed when they had proved their worth.

Manford picked up another pebble, sending it skimming after the first. The men did not trust his word, and he neither cared nor expected them to. They were trapped. Unless they did not mind hanging, they had no other course but to follow him. His men had a name for him—the Smiling Monster. They were careful not to say it in his presence, but he knew of it, just as he knew everything that went on. Oddly enough, the name pleased him; he considered that it had strength, and was in keeping with his gospel that only the strong survived, and the weak went under.

Annaliza Sedgewick paused at the head of the steep flight of steps cut into the side of the cliff. A good distance below her, she spied Richard. He was only a dim figure in the waning light, and so still that he might have been part of the rock upon which he sat. Except when there was a cargo running in from France, she could rely on his being there. In idle times, no matter the season, he would be seated on that rock, always at the same time, gazing fixedly at the ever-changing sea. She understood his love for the sea and the fascination it held for him. To a certain extent, she had felt that fascination herself.

Annaliza sat down for a moment on the coarse grass. Hur-

rying had given her a pain in her side, and she needed to recover her breath. Her eyes dwelt softly on Richard's somehow lonely figure, and as always, whenever she considered his predicament, she felt a pang. Dear Richard! It wasn't fair that such a kind and gentle man should be trapped into leading a life that appalled him. Only once in his thirty years of life had he done anything wrong; he had not told her the details of his crime—it was sufficient for her to know he was trapped.

Annaliza's eyes stared into space, remembering the night when he had confided in her. That night, six months ago, she had just found out about his smuggling activities. Shocked and angry, she had upbraided him, telling him that she never wished to see him again.

"No, Annaliza, I can't lose you!" She could still remember the agony in his voice. Then suddenly he was clinging to her. "I won't lose you. You are like the sea to me, ever changing. I need you. I won't let you go!"

Struggling to free herself, she had said coldly, "You have no choice. You have chosen your life, grant me the right to choose mine."

"Chosen my life? Oh, Annaliza, you don't know how it is. Let me tell you."

She had wanted to turn and run from him, but something about his frantic expression stirred her to an unwilling pity. She said in a softer voice, "Tell me, then. I'm listening."

And so he had told her of that one mistake, omitting the details. He freely admitted that he feared the grim, close-mouthed smugglers who had found out his secret. Let him put one foot wrong, he told her, and they would expose him to the law.

Annaliza frowned. His very sincerity, the look in his blue eyes, had convinced her that he was telling the truth. But just as it had done on that night, it still puzzled her that he should be the leader of the smugglers. "But under the circumstances," she had said, "why have they chosen you to lead them?"

Holding her in his arms, Richard had explained that he was a leader in name only, a figurehead, chosen by them for his superior education and his undoubted brains. But for all that, he went on, his position was no guarantee of safety. He still went in fear that he might lose his freedom, perhaps his life.

Annaliza plucked a blade of grass and chewed on it reflectively. Even then she might have doubted, had not Richard,

summoning up all his courage, taken her before the smugglers and repeated exactly what he had told her. At first she had been deathly afraid that this audacity might result in death for both of them. But the men had not harmed them. They had eyed her covertly, Richard sullenly, and had not attempted to deny his story. They had not even shown any undue resentment over his slight boast about his brains and education.

After that, she had believed in Richard without reservation, and secretly admired the courage he had displayed in his effort to convince her. Nevertheless, there were still those times when he puzzled and vaguely frightened her. There were the things he said, strange, almost callous things that were quite unlike the Richard she thought she knew. And then, just as she began to feel uneasy, the strangeness would drop from him. He would smile, his eyes gentle and full of love. The startled impression she had had of another man within his familiar body would be instantly erased. When his arms went round her and his lips tenderly pressed her own, she would understand that he had been teasing her, and she, fool that she was, had allowed herself to be unduly disturbed. He was as he seemed, she would tell herself fiercely—open, loving, uncomplicated, but unhappy because he was in bondage to the smugglers. If she could save him, she would. But what could she, a girl of eighteen, with little knowledge of the world, hope to do against such ruthless men?

Frowning, Annaliza threw the chewed blade of grass away. Did she love Richard? It was a question she was constantly asking herself. She was almost certain she did, but it troubled her that she could not love with the same fervor as he. Could it be that she was in love with love, rather than with Richard himself? Without warning, a face flashed before her mental vision. A face that was deeply tanned, the features slightly hawkish, exciting, with black curling hair that tumbled above intense midnight-dark eyes. Lord Sin! She hated him. He had taken her body, and he had not troubled to hide his contempt. Even now his words rang in her ears. "I am staying at the inn. If you will come there later, I will pay you."

Annaliza put her hand to her trembling mouth. What would be Richard's feelings if he knew she was no longer virgin? Would he continue to love her? Would he hunt down and punish the man who had raped her? No! It must not be! She could not bear to think of Richard coming face to face with the arrogant Lord Sin. Richard must never know of her

shame. She must not be the cause of further complicating his already troubled life.

Hating the immediate quickening of her body, Annaliza firmly closed her mind to further thoughts of the wicked Lord Sin. Perhaps she should go home instead of descending the steps to meet Richard. After all, she had been away several days, and her father, who did not like her to be away so long, would be anxious to see her. Strange how he disliked Richard and viewed him with such dark suspicion. It was not like her gentle father at all. How horrified he would be if he knew that Richard, needing to know that she was with him all the way, had begged her to help him in small ways. Reluctantly, hating to see hurt in his blue eyes, she had agreed. Sometimes she would hold a light steady for the smugglers, who seemed to have grudgingly accepted her, or, if danger threatened and they must move quickly, she would strain her muscles to help them move the boxes and bales to a safer place. She did it because Richard asked it of her so humbly, but all the same she could not deny that the element of danger always present in her activities excited her. Did her father have any suspicion of what she was doing? Thinking this over, she almost laughed aloud. Never. It would be the last thing he would believe of his daughter. Feeling her conscience twinge, she hastily defended herself. It was not as if she was doing anything so terribly wrong. She could not, for instance, be said to be one of the gang of smugglers; she was more of an onlooker to the excitement of running a cargo. Richard loved her, he would never consent to her doing more than she did, he would never allow her to go blindly into danger.

Making up her mind, Annaliza rose. She would see Richard, but she would not stay long. He would understand.

Manford heard the sharp rattle of small stones bouncing down the cliff steps. Annaliza was coming, as he had known she would. He laughed inwardly. Annaliza, so transparent in all her emotions, so naive. She had been useful to him, and it pleased him to think he had managed to involve the holy man's daughter in smuggling, even if only in a minor way. He intended to see that her role remained minor, for when the time was ripe, he meant to marry her. It was good for a man to have a respectable wife, and who more respectable than a reverend's daughter? He had told her that he loved her, but he did not. If anything, she irritated him with her glowing enthusiasm, her eagerness, even her blind unquestioning belief in himself, but she was the wife for him, and he

must keep that in mind. A pity she was so plain, though. All she really had to recommend her were her extraordinary eyes, large, bright, heavily fringed, the color of tawny sherry. The eyes of a highly sensual woman, which she was certainly not, or of a stalking jungle cat.

Annoyed by his flight of fancy, Manford frowned. Why couldn't she have been nearer to his ideal? He liked full-blown women, with breasts that bounced when they walked, breasts that a man could grab hold of. He liked hips that were hips, not lean and flat like a boy's. Funny, really, his wanting a full-blown rose of a woman and yet choosing to marry a snowdrop of a girl.

"Richard," Annaliza's husky, always faintly breathless voice spoke from behind him, "have you been waiting long?"

He turned his head, smiling at her. "Could any wait seem long in these surroundings? Look about you."

Obediently she looked. It was full dark now, if one did not count the faint lingering glow in the west. The waves reminded her of rearing sable horses tipped with silver. The caves that holed the coastline were dark and mysterious, the sands checkered here and there with moonlight. A breeze brought to her the piny fragrance of the little plants that grew in the crevices of the rocks. "It is beautiful," she agreed.

"The sea is beautiful," Richard corrected. "Only the sea."

Annaliza laughed. "Very well, if you will have it so, only the sea." Thrusting her hands in her pockets, she half-turned away from him.

Richard frowned. "I see you are dressed like a lad again. Why do you do it, when you know I do not care for it?"

She felt a flash of anger at his tone. She was not a child to be dictated to. Did he think he owned her body and soul? Forcing herself to speak quietly, she said, "I told you that I had promised to play some games with the village children. A gown would have hampered my movements."

Sensing her smothered resentment, Richard seized her arm and drew her down beside him. "Sit with me. Let's watch the sea for a while."

Richard and his eternal worship of the sea, she thought impatiently. But in that he was a true Cornishman. He belonged, as they all did, to the wind and the sea, to the rugged beauty and the grandeur that was Cornwall. She stole a quick glance at him. Had he been sitting here longer than usual? His clothing was saturated, his blond hair wildly ruffled, and his hand clasping hers had an icy chill. "Richard," she began, "I—"

"Hush!" he interrupted sharply. "Be still for a moment, and then we will talk."

Sighing, she subsided, knowing from past experience that he would not talk until he was ready to do so. Her thoughts drifted back to Lord Sin, and again she felt, without willing it, that unwelcome thrill course through her body. What was he doing now, that dark, insulting giant of a man? Whatever it was, she sincerely hoped he would come to some harm. Damn him to hell, anyway!

The turn of Richard's head scattered her thoughts and brought her attention back to him. For the moment, it seemed, he had put aside his preoccupation with the sea. "We will be running a cargo tomorrow." He spoke abruptly, as though he had guessed that she was not entirely with him. "The usual time, of course. You may help, if you wish."

Annaliza nodded. For some reason, she found that his voice grated along her nerves, and she wondered why; she had always found his voice pleasant enough before. To make up for the small disloyalty, she answered with more eagerness than she really felt, "Of course I will help. What is the cargo this time?"

Richard, always before inclined to be secretive, answered her without hesitation. "Some French brandy, velvets, silks, brocades, a number of other things." He looked at her closely. "Before you commit yourself, there is something I ought to tell you. It appears that someone has been talking out of turn."

Annaliza flushed guiltily, feeling as though he had accused her. "It is not I," she said sharply.

"I know that, Annaliza." His voice was without emotion. "Nor is it any of the men. I made very sure of that."

"Then who, and what makes you think someone has been talking?"

"There are certain signs one learns to look for, a feeling one gets that all is not well. It is possible to develop a second sense about such things. Anyway, if I am right, it may be that our usual place will be overrun by the law."

"What will you do?"

"I don't know, but I'll think of something. I thought you ought to know, for it would never do to have you run into danger."

Touched by his concern, she did not remember that a moment ago he had given her permission to help. She said anxiously, "But what of you and the men?"

Richard shrugged. "We can take care of ourselves, but you,

of course, are a different matter. If I suspect danger, I will flash the lantern three times, so make sure you watch for it. If you see the signal, you are not to venture near the meeting place. Do you understand?"

"Of course." She disguised the relief she felt with a touch of impatience. "But what will you do?"

The moonlight, which had temporarily disappeared behind a rain cloud, broke free and showed her his mirthless smile. "I have faced danger before, girl. I know which of the caves will bring me out to safety. Had you forgotten that?"

"No."

"They won't even see me go, those long-nosed, prying revenuers—you can be sure of that."

Stirred by a feeling of uneasiness, Annaliza said doubtfully, "But perhaps the revenuers know the caves too."

"Not they." Richard shook his head emphatically. With a hint of laughter in his voice, he added, "Did you know that most of the revenuers that patrol this stretch of the coast are London men? A big mistake, that. There will be a few Cornishmen with the Londoners, of course, but from my inquiries I have learned that they are from another part of Cornwall. Another mistake on the part of the powers that be, and one that will give me a big advantage."

At the back of her mind she wondered why he did not wish to profit by the mistake made by muddle-headed authority, which would surely free him from the smugglers who now controlled his life? She put the thought quickly aside, to be examined later. "But, Richard," she began in a concerned voice, "I know it must seem that way to you. Yet I can't help thinking that—"

"Don't forget about the signal," Richard said, cutting her short. "Mind, now, I meant what I said. If you see it, you are to stay where you are. The last thing I want is a noisy, screaming female getting in the way."

This was the other Richard speaking, hard, unconcerned with her feelings, making her feel uneasy. From the depths of her bewilderment she burst out, "You can say that to me! When have I ever let you down?"

This time he did not slip easily into the comforting role she knew and accepted. "We have never been in danger before," he said in a hard voice. "Or perhaps I should say, threatening danger."

She could not let the subject go. "Do you honestly believe I would hang on to you and increase your danger?"

Richard shrugged. "A lass will always be a lass, not at her best in a crisis."

"I see. You need not worry about it, I will be sure to watch for the signal."

Empty-headed little fool! he thought with a sudden flaring of vicious anger. If he did not need the respectable background that marriage with her could provide, he'd slit her throat and throw her into the sea. He thought of the Reverend Sedgewick, who looked down his long nose at him, despising him, seeming to see through all his pretenses. He hated the holy, prating fool, and his desire to score over him was another reason why he desired the marriage with Annaliza. No one slighted Richard Manford and got away with it, no one! Struggling to control himself, Richard rose to his feet, pulling Annaliza up with him. "Come here to me," he said, forcing warmth into his voice. Putting his arms about her, he drew her into a close embrace. Bending his head stiffly, he kissed her lingeringly on the mouth. "There. I've been wanting to kiss you from the moment you got here."

They why hadn't he? Almost immediately Annaliza berated herself for her impatience with him and for her inability to feel anything when his lips had touched hers. Frowning, she found her thoughts drifting to Lord Sin and the flood of feeling he had aroused in her. Curse the man, how she hated him! He had insulted her, degraded her, and she could not understand why he should come into her mind at a time like this. Well, it was over, she decided firmly. She would never willingly think of him again.

Richard looked down at her absorbed face. By God, he thought savagely, the price of his future respectability came high. Kissing her had been like kissing a child; her primly closed lips had not even attempted to open under his. Releasing her, he said in a driven voice, "Have you told your father about us?" He felt her stiffen, and he prodded further. "Well, Annaliza, have you?"

She shook her head. "No . . . er, not yet."

"Why not? Are you ashamed of me?"

"Richard, no! What a thing to say. It's . . . it's just that my father doesn't like you very much." She smiled at him apologetically. "But it will be all right, if you'll just give me time to get him used to the idea."

Richard's eyes narrowed. About to say something, he checked himself. What did it matter, after all? He was in no particular hurry. She would always be here when he wanted her. Stooping, he kissed her forehead. "Of course I'll give you

time," he said with an attempt at tenderness. "I'm sure your father will come round. But if he doesn't, we'll simply elope." He turned away. "I have to go now. Good night."

Annaliza watched him climb the cliff steps. Taking off her shoes, she dug her toes into the wet sand; then, judging him to be well on his way, she followed slowly.



Ellen, the reverend's maid, was entirely fascinated by her master's London friends. There was Lord Sinclair, whose smile in her direction had set her heart fluttering, and Lady Sinclair, his mother, pretty and gracious of manner. From the conversation that Ellen overheard, she gathered that her ladyship had known the reverend since childhood. From this glamorous twosome, Ellen's attention turned to the other three, and found them to be not quite so fascinating. The two rather disreputable-looking men were introduced briefly by Lord Sinclair as "Melton, my valet, Carrington, my coachman." The tall, grim-faced woman, it turned out, was Lady Sinclair's personal maid.

Somewhat intimidated by Liberty Hayes, whose bearing made Ellen forget that she, like herself, was only a maid, and fearful of being reprimanded for loitering, she retired to the kitchen to await the inevitable call for refreshments. When it came, she carried in a pot of tea and a dish of cakes for Lady Sinclair and the reverend, and a bottle of wine for Lord Sinclair.

Sometime later, Mrs. Lynch, the cook, having done her duty by the guests and their servants, condescended to entertain Carrington in the kitchen, where she fed him a further supply of thickly cut cold roast-beef sandwiches, topped off with his third tankard of ale. It was then that Liberty Hayes made her presence felt. Striding into the kitchen as though she owned it, as an indignant Mrs. Lynch later said to Ellen, she demanded broth for her ladyship. "Tea and cakes are all very well," she said with an imperious look at the cook, "but my lady has been through a great deal. She needs to keep up her strength."

"Is that so!" Mrs. Lynch exclaimed in a hoarse, angry

voice. "And just who do you think you are to be giving me orders, that's what I'd like to know."

"You are already acquainted with my name, and with my position in her ladyship's household, so why ask? You should have more sense, a woman of your age, than to sit there simpering at Carrington like some moonstruck girl. You would be much better advised to do as I ask."

"Oh, I would, would I? Of all the impudence!"

Undaunted, Liberty swept her scornful gaze over the embarrassed Carrington, who, sandwich halfway to his mouth, was staring at her. "That man is an oaf," she said to the cook, "and certainly he is not to be trusted."

Starting, Carrington slammed the sandwich back on the plate. "Here, now, Liberty Hayes," he said in a wrathful voice, "that'll be quite enough out of you. Why don't you just shut your face?"

Unexpectedly, Mrs. Lynch capitulated. Her face red and sullen, she began banging pots about. "All right," she muttered, "I'll get the broth prepared, if that's what her ladyship wants." Her small truculent blue eyes glared at Liberty. "Ain't doing it for you, though."

"As long as you are doing it, that's all that counts," Liberty answered calmly. "As for her ladyship, she has no notion that I have requested broth."

Mrs. Lynch put down the iron pot. "Well, now, in that case—"

Liberty raised a hand, quelling any possible rebellion. "Get it ready," she commanded. "I happen to know what's best for her ladyship." She waited until Mrs. Lynch reluctantly picked up the pot, then added, "Do you have any clean pudding cloths?"

"I have." Mrs. Lynch thrust out her lower lip to show her displeasure. "What you want them for?"

"Bandages," Liberty answered impatiently. "I find that they're softer than linen. I need them to rebind the wound Lord Sinclair suffered. I will make him comfortable until such time as the doctor gets here."

"Doctor?" Looking startled, Carrington sat up straight in his chair. "Go on with you, woman, you're making a lot of fuss about nothing. That wound ain't serious, I heard his lordship say so himself, so what you want with a doctor?"

"It started out as nothing," Liberty answered, frowning at him. "But when I persuaded his lordship to let me look at the wound, I saw that it had become infected."

"Eh! It ain't serious, is it?"

At Carrington's concerned expression, Liberty's stern demeanor softened somewhat. "Enough to warrant a doctor," she answered, "but you need not be unduly alarmed. Get the cloths," she said, reverting to her old manner, "and bring plenty of hot water. You'll find us in the reverend's study." Catching sight of Ellen, she beckoned her forward. "You, girl, do you know where the doctor lives?"

"Yes, ma'am, just down the road. Ain't much good, though. Always drunk, he is."

"Never mind that, just run and fetch him. Fast, now, or you'll be hearing from me."

After an inquiring look at Mrs. Lynch, who nodded her gray head majestically, Ellen ran, as requested. Some ten minutes later, with the unsteady doctor in tow, she returned.

The efficient Liberty, scorning Melton's fainthearted offer of help, had already cleaned and dressed the wound. At the doctor's entrance, she unwound the bandage, her lips tightening as her nostrils caught the fumes of the doctor's alcohol-laden breath. "Disgusting," she said, moving back.

The reverend, seated opposite to Lady Sinclair, was watching Liberty with considerable admiration. "A jewel of a woman," he murmured. "Truly, Araminta, you are fortunate to have her."

"Yes, Giles," Lady Araminta answered. She gave a deep sigh. "I'm sure you must be right." She looked at the frowning Sin. "At any rate, she seems to be the only one capable of controlling my son. He hates fuss, though, and I'm sure he must be very angry with Liberty. I really must speak to her, she takes too much upon herself."

The reverend uttered a nervous laugh. "Upon my soul, but you're right about Jonathan. He looks fit to kill."

Liberty, after instructing the fumbling Dr. Ives in his duty, poured two glasses of wine, handing one to Lady Sinclair and the other to the reverend. "Drink it all down," she ordered. "It's good for the nerves, and it will hearten you." She bent a stern look upon the reverend. "Mind, now, sir, I want no misunderstanding. I don't hold with drinking for pleasure, more especially when one of them drinking is a man of the cloth. But I'll allow that this time it's different."

The reverend gave her a flinching glance. "Quite, quite," he murmured. "Er . . . thank you."

Ellen, standing nearby, suppressed a giggle. It was all very well for that terrible woman to order the reverend about, but there'd be big trouble if she tried it on with Miss Annaliza.

Miss Annaliza had spirit, and she'd not take kindly to Liberty Hayes.

Sometime later, the doctor sent on his way with an admonition from Liberty to "Mend your ways, or you'll be ending in the gutter," Ellen crept up the stairs, hoping for another peep at Lord Sinclair, who had been persuaded to go to bed only by the almost tearful entreaties of his mother. She was dismayed to find that Melton, apparently having misunderstood, had settled his lordship in Miss Annaliza's room. For a moment she debated with herself. Should she go down and inform Melton of his mistake, or should she say nothing? She decided on the latter course. After all, it was none of her business.

Hesitating by the half-open door, Ellen was pleased to note that Lord Sinclair was already asleep. With a furtive look about her, she crept into the room. Stooping over the man in the bed, she admired the strong handsome face, the black hair that curled carelessly over his forehead, the thick black crescents of his lashes against the deeply tanned skin. Putting out a tentative finger, she lightly touched his clefted chin.

"What do you think you're doing, girl?" a sharp voice said from the doorway.

Ellen turned to face Liberty Hayes, the color flaming in her face as she met the woman's accusing eyes. "I . . . I only wanted to see if his lordship had everything he needed," she stammered. A restless movement from the bed caused her to start violently. What if he should awaken and find her here? How would she explain? She could not very well say that she had never seen anyone like him before and had only wanted to look at him.

Liberty solved her dilemma. "Outside, girl. His lordship doesn't need anything from you."

Safely in the hall, the door closed behind them, Liberty studied the girl's scarlet face. "Don't worry about it," she said in a kinder voice. "Lord Sinclair snares the girls every time, so you're not the first to go down before him."

"But I was only—"

"I know what you were only doing," Liberty interrupted. "But you just remember that handsome looks are not everything. Certainly Lord Sinclair doesn't live up to his, for the plain truth is that he's a very wicked man."

"Wicked? How can you say that?" Ellen protested. "Anyway, I don't believe you."

"You'd better, girl, if you know what's good for you. If he

took a fancy to you, he wouldn't think twice about tumbling you in the sheets."

"I thought you liked him." Ellen's voice was accusing.

"I do." Liberty took Ellen's elbow and led her to the head of the stairs. "I'm very fond of him," she resumed, "but I'm not blind to his faults. He's a libertine, and that's a fact. Lord Sin, that's how he's called, and believe me, he lives up to the name." Ushering Ellen before her, Liberty went down the stairs.

Melton was standing at the bottom, freshly clothed, his face pink and shining from vigorous applications of soap, but still wearing an expression of grievance. He looked at Liberty accusingly. "Don't exactly trouble to lower your voice, do you?" he said with heavy sarcasm. "I heard what you were saying to the girl, and it seems to me there's no one you won't lay that poisonous tongue of yours to." He turned to Ellen. "Don't you believe nothing this woman says. His lordship is a fine man. He likes a bit of life, I grant you, but where's the harm in that? Liberty here, she hates all men, so there's just no relying on her word."

"Is that so, Mr. Melton?" Liberty drew herself to her full height, her eyes sweeping over him scornfully. "Well, one libertine is bound to defend another, I imagine." She marched off in the direction of the kitchen, her head held high, her skirts swishing.

The change in Melton was immediate. Forgetting Ellen, he hurried after Liberty, calling in a dismayed voice, "Wait, for me, my dove. You have misunderstood me." The only response to his plea was the hard slamming of the kitchen door.

Ellen shook her head in bewilderment. London people were strange, saying one thing but meaning another.

In the study, seated before a bright fire, Lady Araminta smiled brightly at the reverend. "It's so good to be with you again, Giles," she said in a soft voice, "and such a relief to know that you've forgiven me for my neglect of our friendship."

Leaning forward in his chair, the reverend patted her hand soothingly. "You know very well that I never could resist you, dear Araminta. Besides, there's nothing to forgive."

She laughed. "Sin should hear you now. He was quite certain that you would be stern and unforgiving."

"Jonathan"—the reverend stressed the name slightly—"has grown into a very handsome and distinguished man, but I doubt he can know everything about two old friends."

"You're right, Giles, of course. But that's Sin's way. He's

always been so cool and certain. He's . . . he's very like his father, you know."

"Indeed he is. He's Christopher all over again. But tell me, Araminta, why do you persist in calling the boy 'Sin'? Surely 'Jonathan' is more agreeable."

"Giles"—her voice rose in faint protest—"from the moment of his birth I have called him so. Don't you remember?"

The reverend nodded. "I had forgotten, Araminta. And now that you remind me, I recall that I had this very same argument with you before."

Lady Araminta raised her skirts, letting the warmth of the fire play over her ankles. How would Giles take the news that her son was the notorious Lord Sin? she wondered, darting him a speculative look. Sooner or later he was bound to make the connection, so perhaps it would be wise to get it over with. "Giles," she began in a low voice, "you have no doubt heard of Lord Sin?"

His mouth tightened. "Who has not? Not only have I heard of him, I have seen him."

"Giles!" Completely taken aback, Lady Araminta stared at him. "I . . . I had no idea."

"Yes indeed, Araminta, I have seen the scoundrel. He is, in my opinion, a most immoral man. I have heard that he has more mistresses than the Prince of Wales."

Lady Araminta stiffened. "That is not true, Giles," she said sharply.

The reverend's eyes took in her heightened color. "Araminta, what is the—?"

Ignoring him, Lady Araminta swept on in an angry voice, "What has come over you to say such a thing to me? Such remarks are not worthy of you. I can only assume that you have not forgiven me, after all."

"Araminta!" The reverend's expression of surprise changed to one of comprehension. "Oh, my dear Araminta, are you telling me that Jonathan is Lord Sin?"

Lady Araminta rubbed her forehead with nervous fingers. "Why are you doing this to me, Giles? Why are you trying to confuse me? Did you not say that you had seen him?"

"Yes, I did see him, but . . ." He broke off, looking at her with considerable distress. "Araminta, it's true that Jonathan did seem very familiar to me, but I never thought . . . I never dreamed that our Jonathan and Lord Sin were one and the same. Please believe me, my dear."

She hesitated, still nursing her outrage. "Of course, Giles," she said slowly. "I believe you."

"I would not for the world hurt you deliberately, Araminta." The reverend's brows drew together in a thoughtful frown. "Jonathan Sinclair, of course! I should have known."

Looking at him closely, Lady Araminta decided that his bewilderment and remorse were genuine. He had always been absentminded, even as a young man, and his failure to make the connection was typical of him. "It's all right, Giles." She smiled at him warmly. "However, now that you do know, I imagine you will want us to leave?"

"Leave? Certainly not! I would be lying if I said that I approved of Jonathan's morals or of the shocking tales I have heard about him, but he is your son and Christopher's. That makes a difference."

"Thank you, Giles."

"Araminta"—he looked at her searchingly—"it may be that the stories of his escapades have been somewhat exaggerated. Would you say that is so?"

Lady Araminta gave him a grateful look. "I am sure that there has been a great deal of exaggeration. He is really a very dear boy."

"Er . . . yes. And uncommonly handsome."

Seeing his slight frown, Lady Araminta burst forth into nervous speech. "If you are worrying about your daughter, Giles, please don't. Sin would not dream of abusing your hospitality."

The reverend smiled, his thoughts drifting back to the day of the royal procession. Annaliza, if one could go by her reaction, had seemed singularly unimpressed with the handsome Lord Sin. "I won't worry about her, Araminta," he said with a faint trace of amusement. "She is well able to take care of herself."

"How is Annaliza?"

The reverend's smile disappeared. "Well enough. But there are times when she worries me."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Would you like to tell me about it?" With the comfortable assurance that Sin was not involved, Lady Araminta settled back in her chair, prepared to listen.

"Annaliza is mixed up with someone by the name of Richard Manford," the reverend began slowly. "Most people appear to like him, but I do not. To me, and may I be forgiven if I am wrong, he seems hard and cruel and thoroughly dishonest."

"Oh, dear!" Lady Araminta looked at him sympathetically. "And you believe that Annaliza is in love with him?"

"It's possible." The reverend spoke considerably. "And if that is so, it would be a tragedy. I have no proof, Araminta, but I firmly believe that Manford is part of an extensive smuggling ring. Several times I have seen him deep in conversation with well-known smugglers. Flimsy evidence, I know, but I have a deep and uneasy conviction about the man."

Lady Araminta frowned. "But, Giles, if these men are known smugglers, why have they not been arrested?"

"It is not that simple. It might be known that they are smugglers, but the law requires proof. Those that could give them away will not. Cornishmen are a clannish lot, to say nothing of the fact that they also profit from the activities of the smugglers."

"I see. And you really are convinced that this Manford is part of it?"

"I have said so. I also believe that he is a very important part."

"Where does Annaliza come into this?"

"She has been meeting Manford—I have seen them together. Sometimes I wonder if she, too, is mixed up in the smuggling."

"Giles!"

"Not for profit, Araminta," the reverend hastened to assure her, "but for the adventure." He hesitated. "I retire late, it has always been a habit of mine, and sometimes, when I have looked into Annaliza's room, she has not been there." He sighed heavily. "These absences of hers always seem to coincide with news of a smuggling run."

Lady Araminta looked at him pityingly. "Have you spoken to her about it?"

"Of course. She tells me that she has not been sleeping well of late and that she walks along the sands as an aid to induce sleep."

"Do you believe her?"

"I want to. I can only hope, if Annaliza is involved, that she will come to her senses."

"Perhaps if you followed her one night . . ." Lady Araminta suggested hesitantly.

"I have done so, but I always manage to lose her." The reverend ended the conversation by rising to his feet. "You have had a long and tiring journey, Araminta," he said firmly, "and it's time you were in your bed."

Lady Araminta got up. "You will be sure to let me know if there is anything I can do?"

"I will. But for now, let us forget it. I'm sorry you've not had a chance to meet with Annaliza tonight. Perhaps, as it's so late, she will arrive in the morning."

"It is not so very late, Giles"—Lady Araminta smiled at him—"but I must confess that I am longing for bed. Tell Annaliza I look forward to seeing her."

"She will be surprised and delighted to know you are here."

"Do you think so? I'm sure she cannot remember us."

"She remembers, though imperfectly, as a child does." The reverend laughed. "She has often spoken of the dark-haired, bad-tempered boy, as she refers to Jonathan."

Lady Araminta joined in his laughter. "Perhaps they will get on better this time. Do you think she knows that he is Lord Sin?"

"I doubt it. Now, come, Araminta." The reverend led her from the room and up the stairs. At the door of her room he stooped to kiss her cheek. "Sleep well, my dear. Don't worry about Jonathan. The doctor is something of a broken reed, but he did make him comfortable, and he has promised to look in again in the morning."

"Thank you. Good night, Giles."

"Good night, Araminta." Murmuring vaguely about reading for an hour or two, the reverend took his departure.

Lady Araminta stood there for a moment or two, wondering if she should look in on Sin. Deciding that it would be better not to risk disturbing him, she entered her room, closing the door behind her with a little sigh of relief.



Annaliza made a wry face as she saw the lamplight shining from the window of her father's study. He would be sitting in there pretending to read but consumed with worry because she had not arrived at the promised time. She would have to face him and offer some explanation, but not until she had changed. The old shirt she was wearing was torn at the neck, and stained with juice from a raspberry tart she had consumed earlier in Tregony's Cook Shop. Her breeches were just as bad; there was sand coated on her legs and feet; and her hair, blown by the boisterous wind, was a mass of tangles. Even if her father might be persuaded to forgive her late arrival, he would find it hard to overlook her sorry appearance.

Moving away from the window, Annaliza sat down on a stone bench set beneath a tree. As though waiting for this peaceful moment in a dark flower-scented garden, Lord Sin's dark handsome face rose up in her mind. Once again, at the memory of those experienced caressing hands, those seeking lips, her flesh burned and tingled. Her hands clenched tightly together in protest at this invasion of her thoughts. Damn him! She thought fiercely. May he burn in hell for what he had done to her. Against her will she found herself thinking of her own ardent response to his lovemaking, and a flush of humiliation stung her cheeks. But if she were a hypocrite, she defended herself, Lord Sin was a rapist. Anyway, curse the man, had she not promised herself that she would not think of him? Was she so weak, so lacking in moral values, that memory must seek him out at every turn?

Moral values. Annaliza stirred uneasily. Her father had certainly done his best to instill them into her, as well as many other values, among them self-respect and modesty. And yet, so it seemed, a touch from a stranger could set

them all to naught. Poor father, he deserved better than a hoyden of a daughter, for her ways were certainly not those of a gently reared female. On Sundays, trying to conform, she donned one of her hated gowns and the numerous awkward petticoats that went with it. With her thick unruly hair brushed and braided neatly, and her equally hated bonnet with its wide satin ribbons and the artificial daisies wreathing the brim set primly on top, she was the picture of a reverend's daughter. And yet even then, even if only in her thoughts, she let him down. Seated in the church, her mittened hands folded about her prayerbook, her eyes humbly downcast, she would think not of the sermon her father was preaching, but of the cramped discomfort of her feet in their narrow shoes. Gradually, as she indulged in her favorite day-dream, she would forget where she was. If only she had been born a boy, she would think wistfully. Boys had such freedom of thought and action. When they grew into men, they could choose their own careers, go to sea, join the army, explore mysterious and distant lands, and have any number of glorious adventures. But a girl! She could do none of those things; she was too hedged about by stupid conventions.

Scowling, Annaliza drew her feet up on the bench and rested her head on her knees. Once, ambition stirring strongly inside her, she had gone to Dr. Ives and told him she would like to be a doctor. Dr. Ives, who, if one could go by the number of patients he lost, probably knew as little as herself about doctoring, had regarded her with drunken indulgence. And then, his drink-fuddled brain taking in the realization that she was serious, he had burst into laughter. "Annaliza," he had gasped out, "you will be the death of me with your wild ideas. You are already too much of a tomboy to suit our good reverend, - to say nothing of his pious congregation." Blinking owlishly, he had patted her knee. "Try to be more feminine, child. You will be much happier, and so will your father."

She had paid little heed to the doctor's words of advice, but even now the memory of his laughter rankled. Drunken old fool, with his leeches, his blood-letting, and his bungling care! Perhaps that was why she was so drawn to Richard, who never laughed at her, who always took her seriously. She thought of the kiss he had given her before departing, and her lack of excitement. She found herself hoping that he would not repeat it too often, for the truth of the matter was that she didn't like Richard to kiss *her*. The next moment she

suffered a sense of shock as she realized what she had just admitted. She, who had thrilled to the hated Lord Sin's kisses, did not like Richard to kiss her! There must indeed be something very wrong with her.

Suddenly afraid, unwilling to examine her emotions closely, Annaliza rose and once more crept over to the study window. Through a chink in the red velvet drapes she looked intently at her father. He was standing by his desk, one hand stroking his chin, the other holding an open book, his short-sighted blue eyes closely scanning the lines of print. Fondly her eyes traveled over his frail, stooped figure. She loved him very much, and although he had never voiced it, she knew that he must be disappointed in her. There were her lack of femininity, her constant craving for adventure—all of these things puzzled and confused him. He would be terribly shocked if he knew of Richard's activities or of her own minor part in the smuggling. Annaliza bit her lip. She hated to deceive her father, and if it were not for Richard and his need to have her by his side, she would wash her hands of the whole thing.

Her heart heavy, Annaliza turned away from the window and walked over to the door, which was still standing open to admit the fresh sea breeze.

Mounting the stairs, deep in troubled thought, Annaliza forgot that the third stair always creaked. Now, as it gave out a sound like a pistol shot, she stood very still and prayed that the sound would not bring her father into the hall. She wanted the chance to make herself presentable before she sought him out. To her relief the study door remained closed, and she mounted the rest of the stairs cautiously.

Liberty Hayes, clad in a voluminous flannel nightgown, her frilly nightcap partially concealing the curl papers beneath, was about to descend the short staircase that led to the servants' quarters. Catching sight of the figure hovering outside Lord Sinclair's bedchamber, she stopped dead, her mouth half-open. She recognized the girl instantly as the one they had seen in the village, and she was still clad in those disgraceful breeches. Liberty's narrowed eyes filled with suspicion. The girl could not have known where they were bound unless Lord Sinclair had made sure that she knew. Could he have scribbled a note to her, tossing it out of the barouche window when attention was distracted from him, or, as seemed more likely, had he sent Melton to seek her out?

Oh, but men were shameless, Liberty thought, her meager

breasts swelling with outrage. As for Lord Sinclair, he must have been born without a conscience, if he could actually bed the girl beneath the reverend's roof. Why, she would far rather believe that the hussy had entered the house to steal.

The girl entered the bedchamber, and Liberty's mouth thinned until her lips all but disappeared. Lord Sinclair might be wounded, but if she knew him, he would not allow that to stand in the way of his enjoyment. Swallowing hard, Liberty tried to take a more charitable view. Could she possibly be misjudging him? It might be that the girl had somehow managed to follow them, that she was actually a thief. But if that were so, she must not stand here rooted to the spot. It was up to her to do something. She thought of the heavy candlestick in her room, which, if necessary, could be used as a weapon. Though it would surprise her very much, her thoughts roamed on sourly, if it should prove to be necessary. No doubt Lord Sinclair was already stripping the girl. She put a hand to her hot cheek as she thought of the girl naked in his arms and those slumberous dark eyes of his taking in every detail.

Liberty hastily shut off thoughts of what might be going on in the bedchamber. With the light of battle in her eyes, she turned and retraced her steps. On the unlikely chance that she had misjudged Lord Sinclair, she would get the candlestick. At the top, she hesitated, wondering if she should rouse Melton. After due consideration, she dismissed the idea. Melton, like all men, was an animal. If he should see her in her nightgown, his passion might be inflamed to such an extent that she would be unable to fight him off. Her jaw grimly set, Liberty marched on.

With the door closed behind her, Annaliza crept forward softly. Her room was just above her father's study, and she did not wish to be betrayed by a creaking floor. She was about to light the lamp when a rustling sound caused her to freeze. Someone was in her room; she was certain of it. Her heart beating faster, she listened for further movements from the intruder, and caught the sound of deep, regular breathing. "Who is it?" she said in an unsteady voice.

There was no answer. Her hands shaking, Annaliza managed to light the lamp, her flesh crawling at the thought of eyes watching her. The lamp steadied to a soft golden glow, and she whirled swiftly, her arms thrust forward in a position of defense. She caught her breath in a gasp. Someone lay in her bed, apparently deeply asleep. Whatever else she might

have expected, it was not this! The face was turned from her; she could see only a mop of ruffled hair that looked inky black against the white of the pillowcase. A thin brown hand, a heavy gold ring on the middle finger, was relaxed outside of the covers.

Indignation and bewilderment mingling with her fear, Annaliza grabbed up the lamp and approached the bed. Going round to the other side, she looked down at the sleeping man. Her heart gave a wild leap and hammered furiously; her brain reeled with shock. Lord Sin! But how could he be here, lying in her bed? No, impossible, she was either mad or dreaming. Placing the lamp very carefully on a side table, she stooped low over the bed and studied the sleeping face.

As though her intent stare had penetrated the mists of sleep, Sin frowned and moved restlessly in the bed, muttering something beneath his breath. His eyes opened slowly and looked straight into hers. Unsmiling, he regarded her. "How did you find me," he said at last, "and what the devil are you doing here?"

Annaliza's eyes kindled to wrath. "I might ask you that same question," she snapped. "I did not expect to find anybody in this room, least of all you."

Sin nodded, his calm unruffled. "It must have come as a distinctly unpleasant shock. But then, I did not expect to awaken to find a grubby wench from the village stooping over me."

"Grubby wench? How dare you! Let me tell you this, Lord Sin, you are not in a position to call anyone names. Your reputation is an abomination in the ears of decent people."

"Is it?" Sin said in an interested voice. "But tell me, wench, do you consider yourself a decent person?"

The color flamed into her face. Now she no longer asked herself what he was doing here. She knew what he was thinking, and she could not bear it. "I was, my lord," she said in a strained voice, "until you came upon the scene."

"Ah!" Sin drawled the word sarcastically. "But you have not yet answered my question. What are you doing in my bedchamber?"

"Yours?" She almost choked on her rage. "You are the intruder, my lord, not I."

If he was surprised, it did not show in his face. "Really. Now, that is interesting." With a sudden movement he caught her wrist and pulled her down on the bed. "Either you are

the Gypsy I took you for or you are Annaliza Sedgewick. Which one is it?"

His fingers burned on her flesh, and again she felt the shivering sensation. She longed to pull her wrist free, to lash out at his mocking face. She did neither. Struggling to maintain control, she said in a creditably calm voice, "I am Annaliza Sedgewick, of course. But how did you know?"

He studied her for a long moment. "Of course. I should have remembered those unusual eyes. What a grubby and exasperating brat you were, and I see that you have not changed a bit."

"Stop it!" Despite her attempt at control, Annaliza's voice rose slightly. "Who are you? How come you to know my name?"

"But you already know who I am. I am Lord Sin."

"Damn you!" She glared at him. "You know quite well what I mean."

"I think I do." He laughed low in his throat. "What a pretty little situation this is developing into. Tell me, do you know Lord Sin's real name?"

She stared at him without comprehension. "Naturally. You are Lord Jonathan Sinclair."

"Well, then?" His dark brows rose.

"Well what? What are you . . . ?" Annaliza's voice broke into a gasp. "Jonathan? Surely you cannot be my Jonathan?"

Sin laughed. "I would not go so far as to say I am yours, but you are getting the general idea."

She stared at him wide-eyed. "It never occurred to me that you were one and the same." A flicker of rage came into her eyes. "How can you be so calm? You are here in my home, you know who I am now, and you know what you have done to me. Yet I see no signs of repentance. Under the circumstances, an apology would scarcely undo the harm you have wrought, but you might have endeavored to make one."

"My dear Annaliza, I never repent of my actions, and I certainly never apologize. However, had you not so thoroughly enjoyed our coupling, I might have considered breaking that rule for once, if only in deference to your father." His fingers tightened about her wrist as she tried to wrench it away. He touched a finger of his other hand to her flinching face, drawing a line from brow to trembling mouth. "And you did enjoy it, little Gypsy, so don't waste your time or mine by denying it."

"Oh, my God!" This time she managed to pull her wrist

free. "I'll kill you for that!" Jumping to her feet, she looked wildly about her. Spying the ewer and basin on the table beneath the window, she went plunging toward it.

Jonathan was out of bed in a flash. He reached her just as her hand closed about the handle of the ewer. "Now, that would be a silly thing to do," he said, unclasping her fingers. "If you throw that thing at me, you will awaken the household."

"I don't care!" She struggled against him as he wrapped his arms about her and wrestled her over to the bed. "Don't you dare touch me again!" she cried as he flung her down. "If you do, I promise you that you will regret it."

He placed his hands on her shoulders, pinning her to the bed. "I have no intention of touching you again, so make your mind easy on that score. Now, then, if I let you up, will you leave this room and let me get back to sleep?"

"I will not. This is my room. It is you who will leave." She stared up at him, a glint of triumph in her eyes. "After all, there is nothing else you can do, is there, my Lord Sin?"

He had been about to agree, but at the look in her eyes, he changed his mind. "You think not? But you see, I was given this room, and I intend to keep it."

"Then you are no gentleman!"

"But of course not, you already knew that. Make up your mind quickly. Do you leave of your own accord, or do I throw you out?"

Annaliza went very still. Strangely, now that the first shock was over, she was enjoying this battle of wills. "You would throw me out of my own room?" she said breathlessly. "God damn you for an arrogant fop, you wouldn't dare!"

"Ah, but I would, and you know it." Sin smiled. "But perhaps I will give you another choice. You may stay, provided you become my bed partner. I think perhaps I would enjoy taking your warm and willing body again."

"Swine!" Annaliza's arm flew up, her nails raking at his face. "I am not afraid of you, and you cannot turn me out of my own room."

Swearing, Sin removed his hands, but only to heave her over onto her front. "All right, you asked for it." His hard hand stung her buttocks. "I see now that this is the only way to treat you."

"Don't!" she shrieked, trying to wriggle free. "I hate you. I'll . . . I'll get even with you if it's the last thing I do!"

Outside the door, the candlestick grasped firmly in her

hand, Liberty was listening with grim satisfaction to the shrieks, punctuated by the sound of blows. For once, she thought with a tinge of remorse, she had misjudged Lord Sinclair. The girl must obviously be a thief, for certainly if he had intended a night of fornication, he would hardly be beating her. Liberty nodded her head. It served her right, too, the brazen piece!

"What is going on, Liberty?" Lady Araminta's distressed voice said from behind her. "Is somebody being murdered?"

Liberty turned her head and looked into her mistress's worried face. "Not quite that," she answered, "or I would have to interfere. I hope I know my duty, my lady."

"Yes, yes," Lady Araminta said impatiently, "but what is happening?"

"Lord Sinclair has caught himself a thief, my lady. That is what is happening."

"Liberty!" Lady Araminta paled. "Are you quite sure?"

"My lord has not succumbed, my lady, so I am quite sure."

"Succumbed to what?"

"I mean he's not bedded the thief, my lady, that's why I'm sure."

Lady Araminta drew herself up. "You go too far, Liberty! Do you actually mean to stand there and insinuate that my son would do such a thing with a man? How dare you!"

With Melton breathing down her neck, and Carrington, his arm round the cook's ample waist, staring at her accusingly, Liberty said impatiently, "You have mistaken me, my lady. The thief is not a man. It is the girl we saw in the village, the brazen one who was wearing those breeches."

Lady Araminta's eyes widened. "Absurd, Liberty. How could that girl possibly be in this house?"

"She is, though. I saw her with my own eyes. She came sneaking into the house. Didn't see me, but I was watching her."

"In that case, why didn't you make some attempt to stop her?"

Liberty had the grace to blush as she met the accusation in her mistress's eyes. "I would have done so, my lady, had she not gone straight to Lord Sinclair's room. Appeared to me she knew her way well enough, and I naturally thought—"

"I know what you thought," Lady Araminta interrupted hastily. "Understand this, Liberty, I cannot allow you to criticize my son."

Liberty's lips tightened. "I'm sure I'm very sorry to have offended you, my lady. It will be a hard thing for me to do, but I will do my best to forget that I have known him from a young lad and that I have many times sat beside his bedside and devotedly nursed him through childhood ills."

Lady Araminta put a hand to her suddenly throbbing head. "Oh, Liberty!" she wailed.

"I can only say to you, my lady," Liberty went on, looking at her with forbidding eyes, "that whatever I may say about his lordship, it springs from the heart of my loving concern for him."

"Yes, of course, Liberty." Lady Araminta faltered, intimidated as always by the woman's stern frown. "I understand, indeed I do. It was not my wish to wound you, I only . . ." She broke off, her face blanching at a particularly ear-splitting scream from behind the closed door. "Liberty, do something. We really must put a stop to whatever is happening." She wrung her hands in agitation. "This is too dreadful. Whatever can Sin be about?"

"We will soon see," the reverend's voice said. "Did it not occur to any of you to open the door?"

"Giles!" Lady Araminta turned to him with relief.

"Don't upset yourself, Araminta." His face set, the reverend thrust Liberty to one side and flung open the door. "Stop, Jonathan." His voice rose in command. "I will not have violence in my home."

Sin straightened, casting a look at Annaliza. As he watched, she turned her hot tear-streaked face away and buried it in the covers. She looked so forlorn and childlike that he felt a sudden pang of shame. It had not been necessary for him to be quite so brutal, and yet there was something about this girl that roused his worst instincts.

"Well, Jonathan?" The reverend was unsmiling. "Would you care to explain?"

In something of a quandary, Sin frowned. "Your pardon, reverend," he said at length. "I have caught an intruder. I was perhaps too violent, but crime must be punished."

Listening to him, Annaliza felt a flare of triumph. She could give him away, if she wished. She could tell her father that he had known all along who she was, but had beaten her nevertheless. She pondered this delicious thought, and then abandoned it. She would go along with his story; she would humble him with her magnanimity. See how the arrogant,

brutal swine liked that. If she had gauged him aright, it would gall the proud and lofty Lord Sin to be in her debt.

"Annaliza!" She started violently as her father's hand touched her shoulder. "Annaliza, is that you?"

"Yes, Father." Wincing with the pain of movement, she turned over and sat up on the bed.

"Giles! Did I hear you say Annaliza?" Looking as though she might faint, Lady Araminta fluttered into the room. Flinging a look of burning reproach at Sin, she turned to the girl. "Oh, my poor dear child! I know it is asking a lot, but pray forgive Sin. Had he known who you were, he would not have handled you so."

Annaliza wanted to shout the truth: If that is what you think, then you don't know your son. He is a brute, a savage. Not content with raping me, he has now compounded his sin. But with something of an effort she choked back the accusing words and managed a reassuring smile at the frantic little lady, who was now supported by a tall, grim-faced woman. "Don't upset yourself," she said in a difficult voice. "It's all right."

"My dear, you are so generous."

"But I don't understand," the reverend said, looking thoroughly bewildered. "What is the meaning of this?"

Annaliza caught Sin's mocking eyes, and she flushed with rage. So even now he was not humbled. "It . . . it was a mistake, Father," she stammered. "I did not know anyone w-was in my room. Naturally, when Lord Sin heard someone moving about, he thought—"

"I still do not understand," the reverend interrupted. "What were you doing in this room in the first place, Jonathan?"

Avoiding Liberty's eyes, Melton cleared his throat and stepped bravely forward. "Begging your pardon, sir, but it was my fault. I thought I had the right room, you see."

"Oh." The reverend nodded. "In that case, I can see how the misunderstanding occurred."

"I owe you an apology, sir," Sin said quietly. "And Miss Annaliza too, of course."

"I will accept your apology, Jonathan," the reverend said, inclining his head, "for I feel sure your action was not prompted by malice. However, I must tell you that I deplore violence." He turned to Annaliza, his face creasing into an expression of concern. "I hope you are not too badly hurt, child."

Annaliza felt a vast impatience. Of course she was badly hurt; couldn't he tell that for himself? Couldn't he see what the man really was? She sighed. Why expect the impossible, when she knew quite well that her gentle father saw only good in everybody, except perhaps Richard, and that only out of his concern for her. She clenched her fists tightly together. If only she had the strength to ram her fist into Lord Sin's mocking face.

"Annaliza," the reverend repeated, obviously troubled by her silence, "I asked if you were badly hurt."

"No, Father." She muttered the denial. "I'm all right, don't worry."

"Oh, the relief!" Lady Araminta put a quivering hand to her heart. "But, Sin, how could you behave so?"

Sin straightened from his lounging position. "It was a mistake, Mother. You heard the lady say so herself."

Liberty, who was staring at Annaliza, said in a loud voice, "Do you mean to tell me, my lady, that that girl in the heathen breeches is actually the reverend's—"

"Be silent, Liberty!" Lady Araminta stamped her foot. "Not another word!"

Liberty reluctantly subsided. Instead, she directed a dark and meaningful look at Melton, who flushed and looked away. A pretty kettle of fish, Liberty thought. Directly or indirectly, Melton was almost entirely responsible for the series of calamities that had befallen them. Untroubled by the unfairness of her unspoken accusation, she wondered whether it might not be her duty to marry the lout, after all, if only to save him from himself. If she should decide in his favor, she would inform him that he need not expect to handle her in an unchaste manner. Her eyes fell on Annaliza again, and she promptly forgot Melton. The very idea of that hussy strutting around in breeches. She would not have believed that a man of the cloth would allow his daughter to roam the countryside dressed in such unseemly fashion.

A shriek from Lady Araminta brought Liberty's musing to an abrupt end. "Sin, your shoulder! Oh, dear, you are bleeding again."

"It's nothing, Mother," Sin said quickly, putting a hand to his shoulder. "Certainly nothing to make a fuss about."

Her animosity forgotten for the moment, Annaliza took an impulsive step toward him, feeling a dismay that was not in keeping with the situation. Collecting herself, she turned away. Why should she care if he was hurt? Let him suffer.

Giving the girl a sharp knowing glance, Liberty hustled toward Lord Sinclair. "I will attend to your shoulder, my lord." She looked at Melton. "Can I trust you to obtain some hot water, fool?"

Stiffening with resentment, Melton glared at Liberty. "Don't you call me a fool, woman."

"That will be quite enough, I think," Sin interposed coldly.

"Yes, my lord." Still glowering, Melton left the room.

Sometime later, the room cleared of people and his shoulder comfortable again, Sin stared thoughtfully into the darkness. Originally he had meant to make up some excuse that would enable him to return to London without too many recriminations on the part of his mother, but now, thinking of the hatred blazing from Annaliza's eyes, he changed his mind. He smiled. It would amuse him to prolong his visit, and the grubby little urchin would not be pleased about that, he felt sure.

11



Whipped to a primitive fury by the strong wind, the sea battered against the jagged black rocks, reared yet higher for a dizzying space of seconds, and then fell, sending up great sheets of spray on its downward path. The huge waves, receding with a lashing motion, gave out a sound that was like the hissing of a vast and angry crowd. Undisturbed, the seagulls circled the water, shrilling their mournful cries, and sometimes diving down, to come nonchalantly to rest upon the creamy crests of the heaving waves. In the distance, the uplands, denuded of their veil of mist by the wind, showed the rusty gold of dying bracken.

His black cloak flying from his shoulders, his eyes on the distant view, Sin thought of something the reverend had told him this morning. "In the spring," the reverend had said, "the uplands are carpeted by wild anemones. It is a truly glorious sight, believe me."

A land of contrasts, this Cornwall, Sin thought, with its rugged coastline, its sudden shrieking gales, the small, sunny coves, and the springtime advent of flowers that would smother in beauty the most barren of places. The dramatic and the gentle, irresistibly mixed to baffle and delight the most blasé of city dwellers.

Pulling his cloak tightly about him, Sin looked once more at the two vessels standing far out to sea, their sails alternately collapsing, and then, bloated by the wind, bellying out again. On and off, he had been watching them for some time. From this distance, the cutters, as he judged them to be, looked like toy boats. By screwing up his eyes and concentrating, he could make out the brightness of the scarlet banners streaming from their mastheads.

Descending the cliff steps, Richard Manford stopped dead

as he sighted the vessels. Revenue cutters, goddammit! Were they idling there, preparatory to sailing away, or was their appearance meant to serve as a warning to would-be smugglers? Manford quickly dismissed the latter notion. The revenuers gave no quarter; it was no part of their plan to issue a warning. A surprise attack, that was their style.

Scowling, heedless of the wet sand coating the steps, Manford sat down. The feeling of uneasiness he had experienced yesterday was still with him, and it was not diminished by the hovering cutters. They were expecting a good haul tonight. Rum, wine, brandy, silks, satins, laces, and an assortment of jewelry. If the revenuers descended upon them, there would be bloodshed. He must make sure sufficient firearms were issued, and he would have extra men standing by armed with nail-studded clubs.

Manford's lips tightened as Annaliza came into his mind. If extra hands were needed, he would not flash the warning; she craved adventure, she had said so often enough, so he would give it to her. He liked nothing to stand in the way of his plans for the future, and if she stood in need of protection, she could count on him to aid her, provided it was not at the cost of his own life.

Standing up, he continued down the steps, so deep in thought that he did not at first notice the man standing at the edge of the sea. When he did, he stopped dead again. The wind, lifting the stranger's cloak, gave him a glimpse of a well-cut coat of dark green, breeches of the same shade, lighter green stockings, and black buckled shoes. The hand resting lightly upon a silver-headed cane showed crisp white wrist ruffles. He was unmistakably a London dandy, Manford thought, his lip curling in contempt.

Manford frowned thoughtfully. London dandy, or a spy? This last thought sent an angry rush of blood to his head. If the man were a spy, he could very well have been making some kind of a signal to the revenuers aboard the cutter. The government, waking up to the need for action, had lately been spreading a cunning net to catch the smugglers, and the most unlikely people were the ones helping to spread that net. The people of Penlelly Bay, near Penzance, had been the first to discover that they had been infiltrated by spies. The government men, selected for their easy, pleasant manners, usually had a lavish supply of money, so he had heard, which they spent unstintingly to cultivate friendships and to worm out information. In Penlelly, for instance, suspicion had died

before the ingratiating manners of these spies, and guards had been lowered. It seemed that even in remote Penlelly, money could still talk with a loud voice.

His thoughts brooding and bitter, Manford stepped back into the shadows cast by two towering rocks. What had happened in Penlelly, must not be repeated here. They must all be on their guard against strangers with a too-frank manner or an overfriendly attitude, for who knew where it might lead. The carelessness of the people of Penlelly gave a terrible example of what could happen. Their suspicions lulled, the drink flowing freely, they had spoken incautiously to the spies. Not, perhaps, in the same way they would have done to neighbors and old friends, but sufficient to give the spies a lead that set them on the trail of the smugglers. One moonless night, with a good haul expected, the unsuspecting smugglers had gathered together as usual and taken their accustomed places. The Lander was there to supervise the unloading of the kegs and bales and bulky packages. Other men stood by, armed with firearms and clubs, in case of trouble. The patient ponies waited with sad-eyed resignation to be loaded with the contraband. Once loaded, the ponies would then be led to the people who eagerly awaited delivery of the goods. The scene was set for the advent of the revenuers.

Manford's hands clenched tightly at his sides, for he saw in the disaster at Penlelly a threat to his own organization. As though he had been there that night, he visualized the cutters, black-painted and showing not one betraying light, gliding into the bay like ghosts. Before the smugglers had a chance to defend themselves, the guns spoke with a raking fusillade of shot. The revenuers leaped to shore, armed with firearms and swords. Many of the smugglers were killed, a few had managed to get away, and still others had been taken prisoner.

His malignant eyes fixed on the elegantly garbed stranger, Manford told himself that he had as yet no reason to suspect the man, but it would pay him to be careful. He would talk to him, sound him out. Given the smallest suspicion that he was other than he seemed to be, he would kill him without compunction.

Stooping, Manford picked up one of the large sharp-edged rocks that littered the sand. If he had to kill, he would drag the body to the foot of the steps. The rocks, falling constantly from the cliffs above, made the way hazardous for the unwary stranger, and accidents had happened before. Whoever

found the body would believe him to be a victim of a rock slide.

A sudden lull in the shrieking wind brought a faint sound to Sin's ears, and he whirled swiftly. Even as his eyes took in the rock clenched in the man's hand, his fingers were already twisting the silver head of his cane. With a swift movement he drew out the enclosed sword. "What is it you want, my good fellow?"

Manford stopped, his face ugly with rage. "Here, now, what's this?" he growled, his eyes fixed on the sword.

"Your education has been neglected," Sin drawled, deliberately choosing to misunderstand. He lifted the weapon, so that the blade aimed in a straight line for Manford's throat. "This, my friend, is known as a sword."

"I can see that for myself."

"Ah." Sin smiled faintly. "Tell me, is it the custom in these parts to creep upon strangers clutching such a formidable-looking rock?" The sword lowered slightly. "Perhaps I am more than normally thick-witted, but I gained the distinct impression that you meant me harm. Could I have been wrong, could it have been intended as a gesture of friendship?"

"Go to hell!" Stung by the sarcasm in the drawling voice, Manford threw the rock down. "What makes you think it was meant for you?"

"Put it down to my naturally suspicious nature." Sin slid the sword back into the wooden holder. "I fear you shame me, friend. I can tell now, from that radiant expression of welcome on your face, that I was quite mistaken in your intention."

Manford's rage mounted. Spy or not, he itched to kill him. Stripped of his mask of boyish and ingenuous charm, with which he was wont to greet all strangers, Manford felt distinctly at a loss. He should have questioned first and then picked up the rock, but it was too late to reverse himself now. The stranger's dark eyes had obviously taken his measure, and any act he might think up for establishing friendly relations would be wasted. The man before him might look like a London dandy, but he was clearly someone to be reckoned with. Manford's suspicions that he confronted a government spy hardened into certainty. "Who are you?" he blurted. "What are you doing here?"

Sin's brows rose in surprise. "Why do you ask? Am I trespassing upon private property?"

God curse him! Manford raged silently. The stranger, with

his mocking expression and his sarcastic inflection, was making him feel a fool. "You must know that you are not trespassing," he answered with an effort. "I merely asked you a civil question."

"Two questions," Sin corrected, rubbing his chin with the head of the stick, "but I would not say they were couched in civil terms."

"I'm sorry you think that," Manford answered in a low voice. "Pentongally is one of the more remote parts of Cornwall, and few strangers come here. I was curious, that's all."

"And what of yourself? Do you live here?"

"I do. My name, by the way, is Richard Manford." He pointed toward the steps. "I have a cottage up there."

"Jonathan Sinclair," Sin answered. "I am staying with the Reverend Sedgewick."

"You are a friend of the reverend's?"

"I have that honor. I imagine you are acquainted with him?"

"Naturally." Manford tried for a smile. "Annaliza, his daughter, is my very good friend."

"Interesting." Sin straightened from his lounging position. "If you will forgive me, Manford, I will be on my way. Perhaps we will meet again."

Mumbling a reply, Manford watched him go. The strolling figure looked back, waved a casual hand, and then began mounting the cliff steps.

Turning away, Manford sought his usual seat by the water's edge. Sinclair could still be a government man. The fact that he was a friend of the reverend's, or so he said, in no way absolved him from suspicion.

Watching from her bedchamber window, as she had been doing for some time, Annaliza had a clear view of the beach. From this distance figures looked tiny, but she had had no difficulty in making out Jonathan's tall figure and Richard's shorter, stockier one. Jonathan had been alone for a while, looking out to sea, and she wondered what he had been thinking about. Surely the beauty which so enthralled Richard could hold no appeal for the sophisticated Lord Sin? Later, when Richard joined him, the two had talked for a while, so perhaps they had made friends.

Annaliza frowned. Friends, indeed! How could anyone feel friendly toward Jonathan, who had a wickedly cutting and sarcastic tongue that stung like an adder. As she thought of

the scene last night the hot blood of humiliation stung her cheeks. He could have no shame for what he had done to her, not the smallest amount of conscience; if he had, he could not have added to his crime by beating her like some lackey who had displeased him. She would never forgive him, never!

Annaliza's thoughts broke off as Jonathan turned away from Richard and made his way to the cliff steps. So he was returning at last, was he? She had begun to think he intended staying out all morning, which was no way for a guest to behave. But then, why expect the conventional from him?

Drawing in her head, Annaliza closed the window and sat down. The morning had started badly. Lady Araminta was breakfasting in her room, her father told her, and Jonathan had gone for walk along the beach. This had surprised her, for she had imagined him to be a late riser. After breakfast, she found her troubles beginning, and she had no further time to think of Jonathan. Going into the kitchen to give her orders for luncheon and dinner, she had found Cook, her apron thrown over her head, in a flood of hysterical tears. "What is it, Mrs. Lynch?" she had asked.

Jumping to her feet, Cook had declared that she would not stay in the same house with Liberty Hayes, "for I tell you, Miss Annaliza, if that creature is to be allowed to come into my kitchen and give me orders, then it's time I looked for another situation."

"Mrs. Lynch"—trying to pour oil on troubled waters, Annaliza had given her a placating smile—"tell me what has happened."

"I'm that upset, Miss Annaliza," Mrs. Lynch had rushed on, pounding at her chest with a clenched fist. "The idea of that great gawky Hayes creature, who looks more like a man than a woman, for I tell you she's got a mustache on her upper lip what's plain to see—"

"Mrs. Lynch!"

"It's true, Miss Annaliza. Anyway, the idea of her coming into my kitchen and demanding great quantities of hot water for my lady's bath, when she knows quite well that I've got more than enough to do, it's just more than I can bear."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Lynch. I'll speak to her."

"I'd be obliged to you, Miss Annaliza. Her wanting all that water, and expecting me to turn my kitchen into the devil's pit. Can't work in comfort in a kitchen what's stifling, least-

ways, I can't. It's more than flesh and blood should be expected to stand."

Faintly irritated, Annaliza had answered sharply, "I have said I will speak to her."

Taking offense at her tone, Mrs. Lynch said stiffly, "There's a position waiting for me at old lady Lewisham's, her having been after me for some time to come to her. Still, I don't want to leave you, Miss Annaliza, for I shudder to think how you'd manage without me."

It had taken Annaliza some time, but she had finally managed to soothe Mrs. Lynch's injured feelings. As she went upstairs in search of Liberty Hayes, part of her mind was wondering when she would find the time to wash her hair and search her wardrobe for a decent gown to wear. She might hate and despise Lord Sin, but she did not intend to have him looking down his aristocratic nose at her.

Passing her own room, she found the door ajar. Peeping in, she saw that Melton, who had been told to transfer Lord Sinclair's belongings to the correct room, was sitting on the edge of the bed. His hands covering his face.

Annaliza hesitated. The man seemed to be in the throes of despair. Would it embarrass him, she had wondered, if she spoke to him? Hesitantly she had entered the room and approached the bed. "What troubles you, Melton?" she said in a soft voice. "Can I help you in any way?"

Melton raised his head, and Annaliza saw that his right eye was almost completely closed and the skin about it beginning to blacken. "Oh, Melton," she gasped, regarding the eye with horror. "Did Lord Sinclair do that?"

Melton had given vent to a bitter laugh. "'Tis the work of Liberty Hayes. There's just no knowing how to take a woman, miss, and that's a fact."

Annaliza stared at him, biting her lip to keep from laughing. "I beg your pardon," she said in an unsteady voice, "I don't think I understand."

Melton was silent for a moment; then he heaved a deep sigh. "I have been in love with Liberty for a long time, miss, but she would have none of me until today."

"Oh yes?"

"Yes, miss. Eating my breakfast, I was, when she come to me and told me that she had decided to join her life to mine. 'I will marry you, Melton,' says she."

"But that's wonderful, Melton."

Melton's bitter laugh echoed again. "You'd think so, miss,

indeed you would. Anyway, a man is surely entitled to embrace his fiancée. Don't it seem that way to you?"

"A very natural thing, Melton."

"Natural indeed, but not to Liberty. Overcome with joy, I jumped to my feet and folded her tenderly in my arms. Well, miss, no sooner had I done so than she ups with her fist and lands me a cruel bash in the eye. 'Animal,' she says to me, 'filthy lecher. Never touch me again unless I says you may.' " Melton shook his head. "I ask you, miss, imagine calling me, her fiancé, a lecher, to say nothing of animal."

"I'm so sorry, Melton."

"Thank you very much, miss."

Again Annaliza had been forced to curb a disgraceful impulse to laugh. "Do you . . . do you still intend to marry Liberty, Melton?"

Burying his face in his hands again, Melton nodded and spoke in a muffled voice. "I'm very happy about it, miss."

"Are you really?"

"How can a man be otherwise, when his dearest dream has come true?"

"But, Melton, surely . . ."

Dropping his hands, Melton had regarded her earnestly with his good eye. "You would say to me how can a man live without tenderness, is that it, miss?"

"Well, yes, the thought did occur to me."

"Never fear, miss, little by little I shall strip Liberty's virgin petals until I have revealed the tender heart within."

Recollecting the grim-faced woman of last night who had glared at her with such suspicion, and had afterward, when she had left Lord Sin in triumphant possession of her room, harangued her on the impropriety of her attire, Annaliza was by no means sure that Melton would achieve such a happy conclusion. "I wish you every success, Melton," she said doubtfully.

"That's kind of you, miss." With undiminished gloom Melton rose to his feet. "I must see about moving his lordship to the right room, begging your pardon for the inconvenience suffered, miss." Picking up a dark blue silk robe, he looked at it absently. "My heart may be singing with joy," he added, "but work must go on."

"Yes . . . er, I'm sure you're right." Relieved to be able to make her escape, Annaliza had turned quickly to the door. "I will leave you, then."

"Yes, miss. Thank you for listening."

Halfway along the corridor, Annaliza had seen Liberty Hayes marching toward her; there was no other word that so aptly described Liberty's long, mannish stride. "Good morning, Liberty," she said, endeavoring to imbue her words with the anger she still felt over the woman's unwarrantable impertinence in daring to upbraid her.

Unmoved by her tone, Liberty eyed her grimly. "Good morning, Miss Annaliza." There was a slight improvement in the girl's appearance, she decided, but not enough to merit approval.

Looking at the large copper jug in the woman's hand, which must mean that she was on her way to the kitchen for more hot water, Annaliza decided she must speak; then, experiencing an annoyingly craven desire to put it off, she said in a slightly warmer voice, "Allow me to congratulate you on your forthcoming marriage. Melton has told me the good news."

Liberty's lips tightened. "There is little cause for congratulation, I assure you, Miss Annaliza. Melton, I'd have you know, is a sinner. In marrying him and saving him from his evil ways, I am only doing my duty. There is no more to it than that."

"I see. I have always understood that marriage is a cause for joy. It does seem to me that such a cold word as 'duty' should not enter into it."

Liberty shook her head, her expression disapproving of the girl's words. "Joy, is it, Miss Annaliza? Let me tell you this, I despise all men, deeming them to be quite unworthy of a good woman's heart. However, if it be within my power to pluck one brand from the burning, I shall attempt to save Melton from himself. More I cannot say."

With the despicable example of Lord Sin always before her eyes, Annaliza felt that she should not be surprised at Liberty's attitude. All the same, thinking of Melton's woe-be-gone face, she retorted hotly, "Nonsense! If you have no love for Melton, you should not marry him."

"Indeed!" Liberty looked scandalized. "A fine thing it is when a wench scarce out of the toddling stage tells me what I must or must not do."

Annaliza stiffened. "Once again you forget yourself," she said in a bleak voice. "For your information, I am no babe. I am eighteen years old."

"'Tis no great age, I'm thinking." Unexpectedly Liberty's angular face was softened by a smile. "I like spirit in a lass,

and you do well to think of others, even such a one as Melton. If it will ease your concern for the old fool, then I will tell you that I have a certain fondness for him. But I will not tolerate sin, and most certainly I shall never make my feelings known to him until he has mended his ways."

Taken aback by this semireversal, Annaliza stared at her in bewilderment. "But if you care for him, why did you strike him?"

"Because, Miss Annaliza, I objected to being embraced in front of that woman in the kitchen, who could scarce conceal her vulgar curiosity." Liberty sniffed. "Melton should have known better."

"And that reminds me, Liberty," Annaliza said quickly. "Mrs. Lynch is very upset by your demands, so much so that she is talking of seeking another situation. If you require hot water in great quantity, you must heat it for yourself."

"Indeed."

"Yes. And another thing, you will not give Mrs. Lynch orders. She is responsible only to my father and myself. Do you understand?"

"Not being an imbecile, yes, Miss Annaliza, I understand." Liberty's laugh sounded, as unexpected as her smile had been. "I thought that fat lump would go whining to you. But when she did my bidding, I could not refrain from finding out how far I could go."

"I think I understand. But you must not do it again."

"I hope I know my place," Liberty answered with a return of her former stiffness. "However, I'm sure you'll not mind if I give her a much-needed lecture on her slovelly ways and the terrible waste of good food?"

Annaliza, who had often wanted to lecture Mrs. Lynch on the same subjects, was almost tempted to agree. Putting the temptation aside, she said firmly, "Certainly not. Do not antagonize her further."

"If it's because you fear she'll leave, Miss Annaliza, let me assure you she won't. That woman knows when she's well off." Liberty tightened her grip on the jug. "I need more hot water, but I will get it myself." She moved away, her white apron rustling.

Smiling in spite of herself, Annaliza was just about to enter her temporary room when Melton, laden with baggage, came into sight. "I have packed all his lordship's things, miss," he said in a sepulchral voice, "and I've left your room all neat and tidy."

Annaliza was interrupted twice more before she could settle down to her own concerns. Once to break up a threatening fight between Carrington and Sam, the stableboy. The second time to settle a further dispute that had arisen between Mrs. Lynch and Liberty. Neither woman taking notice of her, she was forced to call upon Lady Araminta, who, with a charming air of helplessness that, Annaliza felt sure, concealed a strong will, sent Liberty to work on a small tear in the skirt of her blue gown.

When Annaliza entered her room again, she was conscious of a wave of depression. She felt almost too tired to set about the task of washing her hair and making herself presentable. It was only the memory of Jonathan's words—"grubby little wench"—that finally spurred her on.

Sometime later, her freshly washed hair almost dry, she watched Jonathan mount the cliff steps. Jonathan! she thought with an inner sneer at herself. What quirk had her mind taken now, that she must start thinking of him by his given name? Irritated, she nonetheless found that her resolve to show him that she could look well was strengthened.

Annaliza turned quickly to her clothes closet. After much thoughtful concentration, she finally selected a rose-pink gown. Like the rest of her gowns, it was shabby and faded from repeated washings, but the color that remained went well with her smooth brown skin; also, she noted with satisfaction, the cut of the bodice was flattering to the full thrust of her breasts. Slipping into the gown and settling the flounced skirt about her slender hips, she told herself that her father would be pleased with her improved appearance. If she pleased her father, what cared she for the opinion of the hateful Lord Sinclair?

Peering into the oval mirror, Annaliza turned her attention to her hair. Feeling it, she found that it was completely dry. She was pleased with its sheen, but she found herself wishing that it had a curl instead of being so rainwater straight. Discontentedly she lifted the long, thick mass. Would it be better if she bundled it up and fastened it in her usual style, or should she leave it loose? Loose, she decided. It would possibly be more flattering.

Half an hour later, coming slowly down the stairs, Annaliza found Sin in the hall, preparing to enter the study. Her heartbeat accelerating, her face set in a mask of disdain, she approached him. Why was he looking at her like that? Surely he did not think she had dressed for his benefit?

Regarding her, Sin was agreeably surprised. Her flounced pink gown showed her brown skin to its best advantage, her hair, reminding him of a gleaming sable cloak, fell past her slim shoulders. An Indian maiden, he thought. An Indian maiden who had been dressed by a white society to conform to the accepted pattern. "I would not have known you," he said, smiling at her warmly. "You look extremely pretty."

A burning flush scalded Annaliza's face. Pretty? How dare he mock her. He knew very well that she had no looks to speak of. It was cruel of him! Uncalled for. "Thank you, my lord," she answered him in an icy voice. "I am happy that I meet with your apporval."

"You do indeed." He touched the tip of her slightly tilted nose with a teasing finger. "Won't you call me Sin?"

"Why not. It goes very well with your character."

"Ah! A well-deserved thrust. Don't you care that I think you look pretty?"

"I do not. If you want the truth, I care not a fig for your opinion."

"So I thought, going by the hostile look in your extremely beautiful eyes."

Did he really think her eyes were beautiful, or was he mocking her again? He was mixing her up, making it difficult for her to think clearly. His personality was overwhelming, he was too handsome for her peace-of-mind, and he was standing much too near. Color flooded her face again as she remembered the encounter at the inn, his naked body molded to hers, his slender ringed fingers caressing her skin, his lips burning against her breasts. Horrified, she experienced a powerful longing to be in his arms again. She was mad, sunk beyond reproach! Afraid to look at him directly, she said in a cold, remote voice, "There is a fire in Father's study. If you would care to go in and make yourself comfortable, I will bring wine."

"Thank you."

Annaliza turned away, only to be halted by his touch on her arm. Don't touch me! she wanted to scream at him. I am a wanton, I must be, for you make me lose all control. Swallowing, she said huskily, "What is it?"

"Annaliza," Sin's voice came softly, coaxingly, "won't you look at me?"

Desperately she shook her head. "No, my lord, I will not. My only wish is to forget you. You are my father's guest,

so I must be polite, but if you have any decency, you will cut your stay short."

"Annaliza, I am trying to apologize."

Her eyes flew swiftly to his, and then away again. "I know that to be a lie, my lord."

"It's no lie." Sin's fingers stroked her arm. "I know I told you that I rarely apologize, but I am doing so to you, Annaliza. Will you forgive me?"

Slowly, reluctantly, she turned to face him. The mad thing was that she wanted to forgive him. Then, with a sense of shock, she saw that a change had taken place. The repentant man was already vanished; in his place was the scandalous Lord Sin, the man for whom so many foolish women had made havoc of their reputations. The eyes gazing into hers were slumberous with awakened desire, as dark as the hair that curled over his forehead, thick hair that had the blue-black sheen of a crow's wing. Annaliza drew in a gasping breath. It was hard, so very hard to resist the strong pull of his vital and dangerous attraction. His caressing voice sounded again. "Well, Annaliza, will you?"

She looked at him with eyes that held a dazed expression. "Will . . . will I what?" she stammered.

"Will you forgive me?"

In a last effort at defiance, she said in a shaking voice, "No! I will never forgive you. It is useless to waste your time in an attempt to persuade me."

Sin shrugged. "Very well, then, Annaliza, I will not waste my time." He smiled faintly. "After all, if one has to persuade a woman, it is foolish to put out effort on a cause already lost. Don't you agree?"

Annaliza's expression grew resentful before the laughter in his dark eyes. "At least you have the grace to admit that I am a woman," she flashed. "Last night, if my memory is not at fault, you called me a child."

"No, your memory is not at fault. Last night you looked like a child." Sin put his hands on her shoulders, drawing her closer. "But today, sweet Annaliza, today you look like a woman, and a very desirable one."

Annaliza's trembling was stilled by the fury that surged through her. Was there no end to his impudence? Had he no conscience at all? Knowing what he had done to her, how dare he touch her so intimately! Curse him straight to hell! No man should have such power that he was able by a look, a soft word, a caressing touch, to reduce a woman to a

quivering fool whose only desire was to be held tightly in his arms, to feel his lips burning on hers, tracing a flaming passage over her naked body. Tears sprang into her eyes. Oh, God, she was truly shameless! Even her anger was not sufficient defense against him. What was she to do? For as long as he remained in this house, how was she to resist him?

As though he read her thoughts, Sin's arms slid from her shoulders to draw her into a close embrace. "Come, Annaliza, be reasonable. Since I am here, a guest in your home, we cannot be fighting all the time. Shall we kiss and be friends?"

"No!" Her heart was beating so hard that she found difficulty in breathing. "You . . . you . . . How dare you touch me!"

Ignoring her, Sin tightened his arms about her. "One kiss in the cause of friendship," he murmured. "Dear Annaliza, it is little enough to ask."

Annaliza's thoughts whirled chaotically as his mouth covered hers in hard demand. She stiffened as his hand moved downward and touched her breast lightly. His fingers seemed to burn through the thin material, and she felt the instant hardening of her nipples. She was lost, and she knew it. Her resistance had collapsed as though it had never been. She could not fight anymore, she did not want to. Her mouth opened hungrily beneath his, her hands clung to his shoulders as, in a gust of hot desire, she pressed her body fiercely against his. Though she died for it, she could not stop herself now.

Liberty Hayes, on her way to the kitchen, where she had intended to divert herself by once more harassing the long-suffering Mrs. Lynch, stopped dead on the stairs, bristling with outrage at the spectacle that met her shocked eyes. Shocking, disgraceful, brazen! Miss Annaliza, her long dark hair falling free, looked like a mere child in Lord Sinclair's embrace. Liberty sniffed. Child? Huh! From the way she was responding, the chit was certainly not that. Her slender body was pressed against his lordship's in a most lewd and suggestive way, a mute encouragement of his sinful ways. Really! One would never believe the girl to be a reverend's daughter. As for Lord Sinclair, he should be ashamed. Imagine seducing his host's daughter, and not even caring who saw him. If those two intended to go on sinfully, they might have done so in decent privacy.

Words like "lecher" and "harlot" springing into Liberty's mind, she told herself that she was thankful that Lady Sin-

clair had gone for a stroll with the Reverend Sedgewick. It would have broken her ladyship's heart had she been witness to her son's vile conduct. Averting her eyes, her mouth pursed primly, Liberty continued silently down the stairs. "I might have known," she muttered under her breath. "Wherever Lord Sinclair goes, there springs up another Sodom and Gomorrah!"

Passing through the green baize door that led into the kitchen, Liberty encountered Melton. "What are you doing here?" she said, fixing stern eyes upon her fiancé.

Melton's good eye blinked anxiously. There was no way of knowing how to take this woman who was beloved of him. "Just getting myself a drink," he countered hoarsely.

"So you say," Liberty said, her sternness undiminished. She flicked a suspicious look at Mrs. Lynch. "But who is to know what you get up to when my back is turned?"

Hurt, Melton drew himself up. "My love, my blossom," he protested, "how can you wound me so?"

Liberty glared at him. "Don't stand there clattering nonsense at me," she snapped. "And another thing, you will not call me by those foolish names."

Melton sighed deeply. "What, then, shall I call you, my dearest love?"

"Until we are married, you will refer to me as Miss Hayes."

Melton brightened. "Then we are still going to be married."

Liberty nodded her white-capped head majestically. "Certainly. It is my duty to save you from yourself."

Emboldened by the slight softening in her harsh voice, Melton slid his arm about her waist. "How about doing a bit of saving now," he murmured hopefully. "Do with saving, I could."

Uttering a gasp of outrage, Liberty freed herself. Walking over to the table, she picked up a rolling pin. Turning, she brandished it in Melton's appalled face. "If you ever touch me again without my permission, I shall lay your head open to the very bone. Do we understand each other, Melton?"

Melton's shoulders sagged. "Yes, my love . . . I mean, Miss Hayes."

"Go, then. See if you cannot save your master from the fresh evil into which he is plunging."

"Evil? What's he done now?"

"You must see for yourself, Melton. I have no intention of soiling my lips with details."

Liberty waited until the door had swung shut behind Melton; then she turned to the grinning Mrs. Lynch. "Wipe that smirk off your face, woman," she snapped. "My requirement, at this moment, is plenty of hot water. See to it!"

Mrs. Lynch folded her arms. "See to it your bloody self," she retorted. "I ain't doing nothing more for you."

"We shall see," Liberty said, allowing a grim smile to play about her thin lips. "We shall see, Mrs. Lynch."

12



Running into her room, Annaliza slammed the door shut behind her. Her lips a hard line in her colorless face, she walked over to the clothes closet. Opening the fretted door, she dragged out the garments she would need for her rendezvous with Richard. She tossed a tattered shirt on the bed, rough breeches, a man's cap. Hesitating, she added a thick coat that had once belonged to her father. The bulky coat, disguising her slenderness, would further preserve her anonymity. Also it would be cold by the water; the wind would be blowing in from the sea, with nothing to break its cutting force. She fingered the coat. She would be of little use to Richard if she were too numbed with the cold to play her part.

Keeping her mind busy with trivialities in her continuing effort to thrust the disturbing Lord Sin from her mind, Annaliza glanced toward the window. There was no moon. It was a night such as smugglers prayed for. Without those silvery rays to spread pale light over the countryside, the smugglers would be feeling especially secure.

Annaliza frowned thoughtfully. Richard was careful—it was his way; but the men who worked with him, not having his keen intelligence, relied too much on the shrouding darkness. They were, she knew, inclined to think of the revenuers as fools, but in this belief they were quite mistaken. The revenuers, profiting from past experience with the wily ways of their perpetual quarry, had been known to wait eagerly for just such a night as this. The hulls of their cutters painted black, lights doused, and the crew forbidden to utter a word lest it carry over the water, they sometimes took the smugglers unawares.

Annaliza moved over to the open window. Her hair

streamed wildly in the strong wind as she leaned out. Jake Barton and Bill Howley, members of a rival smuggling gang, had been taken in a surprise raid by the revenuers. The others in the gang, promptly scattering, had managed to get clean away, but Jake and Bill had hung for their crime. Their miserable end had jolted Richard badly. Always careful, he had now become almost fanatical in his resolve not to let such a disaster overtake him or his gang. These days he had more men than were strictly necessary posted on lookout, and his escape routes were carefully planned. The beach was honeycombed by caves, some of which were blocked with fallen rocks, but still others of which led to freedom. The latter caves were as familiar to Richard as his own face in the mirror.

Annaliza, shown these escape routes, had been puzzled by Richard's intensity. "I understand your concern for your own safety," she had said to him. "But why do you work so hard to keep the men secure?"

"Why do you think?" Richard had answered her with sharp impatience. "I am their leader. They look to me for their safety."

"But you are not their leader by choice," Annaliza had reminded him. "At least, so you told me."

The hard look had left Richard's face. "Not doubting me, are you?" He hugged her to him. "Because if you are, that would hurt me very much."

Many times Annaliza had been plagued by doubts. It had seemed to her that the men, rather than menacing Richard, were afraid of him. Suddenly fearful of speaking her thoughts aloud, and not understanding why such a fear should come to her, she had shaken her head. "Not doubting you exactly, Richard," she had answered in a breathless voice, "but sometimes I am puzzled. Those men are your enemies; you have said so. Why would you wish to protect them?"

"For my own safety, of course. Should they be taken, they would betray me."

"Yes, but, Richard, I—"

Richard had stopped her mouth with a kiss. "Don't let's discuss it anymore," he had said after a while. "Either you believe me or you don't. Which is it?"

Before the candid look in his blue eyes, the warmth of his smile, her doubts had been swept away. Richard was in a trap, and those men could spring the trap at any time they chose. She must remember the danger in which Richard stood, and not spend her time pandering to her foolish and

overactive imagination. Returning his smile, she had said quickly, "Of course I believe you, Richard."

"No more doubts?"

"I didn't really have any."

"That's good. Your belief in me means a lot."

Annaliza leaned farther out of the window. Had the lantern flashed a signal warning her to keep away from the smuggling run, or had she, in her fascination with Jonathan, missed it?

Drawing in her head, Annaliza closed the window with a little bang. Why could she not clear her mind of thoughts of Jonathan? From the moment he had kissed her in the hall, she had become like all the other women who reputedly ran after him. That kiss, it had seemed to her, had opened up a new world, and her hatred of him had been completely forgotten. Her mouth twisted bitterly. How absurdly naive she had been to think that his kisses and his whispered, intimate words meant anything. What a fool he must have thought her! Obviously the sophisticated Lord Sin had brought his philandering to a fine art. He was willing to bed her, to stay with her for a few hours, but he did not expect to be taken seriously. But unfortunately, never having known a man like him, she had taken him seriously.

Her face burning, Annaliza wandered over to the mirror. Stooping, she examined her face minutely. She had nice eyes, that much was true, but her mouth was too wide for beauty. As for her slightly tilted nose—"intriguing," Jonathan had called it, "saucy"—it could not be described as other than insignificant. And yet strangely, held tightly in Jonathan's arms, she had felt beautiful. Jonathan made you feel that way, charming, exciting, all of the things that a plain girl like herself had longed to be.

Holding back tears, Annaliza dragged a chair over to the window. Sitting down, she fixed her eyes intently on the spot from which the light would flash. After a moment her concentration vanished and her thoughts winged back to Jonathan. She was angry and she was hurt, but in fairness to Jonathan she had to admit that he, once he realized that she had taken him too seriously, had been both gentle and kind. He had tried, in his own way, to let her down without injury to her pride. A certain note in his voice setting her normal intelligence functioning once more, she had understood that she had misconstrued, and she had been quick to seize the excuse offered by his words.

Annaliza leaned back in the chair. She must face the truth, however distasteful, and the truth was that it was not entirely Jonathan's fault. She had been too eager, too willing. Had he cared to take advantage of the situation, he could have carried it to the inevitable conclusion. Had he asked it of her, she thought, her face burning with shame, she would have gone to his room and shared his bed.

Drawing in a sharp breath, Annaliza sat up straight, her eyes gazing unseeingly into the night. Away from Jonathan's disturbing presence she could think and reason. The plain truth was that she did not like what she had learned about herself. Jonathan had revealed the stranger inside her, for she had never felt this hungry yearning for Richard or any of the other young men of her acquaintance. But for Jonathan, her thoughts were incredibly wanton, her body one burning ache of desire. Annaliza clenched her hands on the arms of the chair. When they had drawn apart from that long embrace, Jonathan had said in a wondering voice, "I was not wrong about you, Annaliza."

"Wrong? What do you mean?"

Jonathan's teasing finger had traced her nose, the full line of her lips. "Your looks belie you, little one," he said softly. "You are no prim girl, you are an exciting woman, full of fire and passion."

"A Gypsy, perhaps?" she had said, smiling at him.

"Yes, a Gypsy, with the same primitive emotions."

She had not known quite how to take this, and so she had dismissed it. Happily, she had moved close to him again, her eyes shining, her mouth eager for his kiss. "Hold me, Jonathan. Hold me!"

Jonathan's dark eyes had studied her, and she had been puzzled by their expression. Opening the study door, he had said in a low voice, "We will be more comfortable in here." Heedless of his wounded shoulder, he had scooped her up into his arms and carried her into the room. "That's better," he said, depositing her on the couch.

Tormented by the memory, she wondered what she must have looked like to him, her eyes shining, her hair disheveled, her arms reaching for him. She was the daughter of his host, and though nothing showed in his expression, her eagerness must certainly have embarrassed him. Making matters worse, she had patted the couch invitingly and had urged him to sit beside her.

With a faint frown that had not registered on her con-

sciousness at the time, he had accepted the invitation. Snuggling close to him, she had twined her fingers in the thickness of his hair. "Kiss me, Jonathan," she had begged.

He had kissed her, bruising her mouth with a burning savagery that had both shocked and thrilled her, and then, abruptly, he had thrust her away. "No more, Annaliza," he had said in a harsh voice. "Revenge, you must know, can be a two-edged sword."

"Revenge? What are you talking about, Jonathan?"

Jonathan had smiled at her. "Oh, come, Annaliza! Do you take me for a complete fool? Do you actually think I cannot see through your little game?"

Confused, her heart throbbing painfully, she had lost her temper. "What the devil are you talking about? Speak plainly!"

Jonathan's smile had lingered. "Very well, if you will have it so. This little flirtation you are indulging in with me is your way of taking revenge."

Confusion fought with anger. "I have no notion of your meaning." Her words came out sullenly.

"But of course you do. Don't pretend, Annaliza. This little interlude has been very sweet, but for you it has no real meaning. You want me to try to seize my advantage, don't you? When I do, you will turn away from me and remind me in that damnable cold voice of yours that I raped you, and your seeming submission was only a game. It's true, isn't it, Annaliza? But I have to remind you that I am too old a hand to be caught in your little trap. Well?" His dark brows quirked mockingly. "Will you have the effrontery to deny what I have said?"

It was the way he was looking at her, the insistent note in his voice, that gave her the first clue to what he was about. He had already wearied of her, and he was trying to give her a graceful way out. Feeling torn apart inside, mentally staggering under the burden of her humiliation, she had wanted to burst into tears. Instead, she had raised her head and smiled at him with a hard brightness. "You are much too clever for me," she said in a cool voice. "How came you to guess?"

Not looking at her, Jonathan twisted the plain gold ring on his middle finger. "It was not so very hard. I had only to remember how badly I had insulted you."

She could scarcely bear the pain of repudiation. And yet how could she possibly have believed that she, plain, insignif-

cant, could have captured the interest, perhaps even the love, of the notorious Lord Sin? Surely, in those moments she had spent in his arms, she had been insane. Again she forced the smile. "Ah! I had forgotten that you are a connoisseur of women."

"I am thought to be tolerably expert in feminine ways."

"So I have heard. Nevertheless, I did not think you would see through me so easily. Perhaps, had I the advantage of beauty, I might have managed to delude you."

Sin's eyes turned to her, lingering on her face. "If you think that you do not have beauty, then you are a fool!"

Startled by the roughness of his tone, she had flashed at him, "Whatever else I am, I am no fool. I am plain, and I know it."

"Then you are not only a fool, you are blind as well." He paused, and then went on quickly, "How can you be plain, when you have eyes that light up that intriguing pixie face like a pair of golden lamps?" Hesitantly, almost as though, or so it seemed to Annaliza's inflamed imagination, he feared that she would resume her embarrassing and unwanted attention, his hand touched her hair and stroked it gently. "When I first saw you with your hair loose," he said softly, "it reminded me of a sable cloak. Hair as dark as night, so soft, so shining, that it seemed to me an apt description." His fingers twined a lock of her hair. "But now it reminds me of a curtain of black satin."

Annaliza detached her hair from his fingers. "Very poetic," she said in a hard voice. "But I don't believe a word of it."

Sin shrugged. "Believe what you please, then. But to say that you are plain is nonsense."

"You are very kind, Jonathan. If I were foolish enough to believe you, I would begin to think of myself as a *femme fatale*."

Sin smiled. "Assuredly you are not that, Annaliza." His smile died as he caught her fleeting expression of indignation. "Be thankful. These so-called *femmes fatales* can be cursed boring, and you could never be that."

Although she knew it was foolish, she could not refrain from uttering the words that sprang instantly to her mind. "Had I been more sophisticated, you would probably have found me interesting."

Sin was silent for a moment; then he said considerably, "Sophistication does not suit all women. As for interesting, you are certainly that. I raped you, but you did not give me

away. I beat you, but you did not try to take revenge. Yes, I would say you are most interesting, and certainly unexpected." He shook his head. "Stay as you are, Annaliza, don't try for sophistication."

Reminded of the reason he had held out to excuse her wanton conduct, Annaliza said quickly, "You have forgotten something, have you not?"

Sin looked at her with faint surprise. "And what would that be?"

"I did try to take revenge. You yourself remarked upon it."

"So I did," Sin said quickly. His head on one side, he regarded her intently. "Take my advice, Annaliza, don't try to change yourself."

"That is the second time you have said that. Why should I not change, if it suits me to do so?"

"Because it would be a pity. You would lose that certain something that makes you unique. Speaking for myself, I find you refreshing, a tonic for a jaded palate."

Smothering an urge to ask him what that certain something might be, Annaliza stared at him suspiciously, wondering if he was making fun of her. "You may find me a tonic today," she answered tartly, "but tomorrow, who knows."

"Threats, little one?"

"Why not? I could make things very uncomfortable for you."

"You could indeed." Sin straightened the ruffles at his cuff. "But you won't."

"Don't be too sure of that."

A few moments later, Lady Araminta and her father had entered the room, breaking the silence that had lengthened between herself and Jonathan. Annaliza had smiled brightly, showing no trace of her turbulent feelings. A request from her father to bring wine for Lady Araminta had given her the excuse she needed to leave the room.

Her ordeal was not over, however, for later, seeing no way to avoid it, Annaliza had presided over the dinner table. Clad in a primrose-yellow gown, her gleaming hair loose and held back from her face by a wide satin band sewn with small yellow roses, she knew she looked well. Her appearance earned her a compliment from Jonathan. "You look like a spring morning," he said softly.

Annaliza tossed her head in a coquettish manner, but her eyes and her voice were cold when she answered. "Why,

thank you, Jonathan, but since it is evening, the simile is ill-chosen."

"Perhaps. I beg your pardon."

After that, she had set herself to be gay and charming, and was rewarded by her father's expression of beaming approval. She was aware, too, of Jonathan's concentrated attention, but she no longer deluded herself. She was not a woman to him, she was a child. It was her quick laughter, her small jokes, that had earned his attention. As much as she meant to him, she had thought bitterly, she might just as well have been a performing monkey. Although she had schooled her expression to show only that surface lightheartedness with which she entertained her guests, it was a refined agony to sit beside Jonathan, the wide cuff of his satin jacket brushing her arm every so often. In the course of the evening, the bitter knowledge came to her that her feelings for him went deeper than a mere sexual attraction. She was hopelessly, helplessly in love with him.

Once, looking at Jonathan, she had found herself snared by the intent expression in his deep, dark eyes. Fascinated, her heart pounding, she had been unable to look away, until like a shadow passing over her mind, the thought of Richard Manford had broken the spell. Richard! How was it possible that she had actually thought herself in love with him? Her feelings for Jonathan were like forest fires raging out of control. Beside that holocaust of emotion, all other men had become nonexistent. Jonathan, she faced the unpalatable fact, might never regard her with anything other than the cynical amusement he had earlier displayed, but for her, for the rest of her life, there could be no other man. It was a bitter reflection, but she knew it to be true.

Fresh tears stinging her eyes, Annaliza came back to her present surroundings. She brushed the tears from her eyes, her face growing hard with a sudden resolution. Looking about the familiar confines of her bedroom, she thought how absurd it was of her to sit here mooning. She must take a firm hold on herself, do her very best to put Lord Sinclair out of her mind. Surely, if she tried hard enough, she could do it. She was not living in a fairy tale, she reminded herself, where the noble lord fell madly in love with the lowly daughter of the reverend, for this was how Jonathan probably regarded her. This was real life, and nothing could ever come of her foolish dreams.

Annaliza bit down hard on her quivering lower lip. Damn

Lord Sin anyway, damn him to hell! What right had he to come here and turn her uncomplicated life upside down? Why hadn't he stayed in his own circles, where he would have remained for her only a notorious name? She was not going to spend her time remembering the exquisite sensation of his exploring hands, or the feel of his naked body burning against her own.

Realizing how miserably she had failed to shut out thoughts of Jonathan, and had, instead, sat here indulging herself, Annaliza rose from the chair and walked over to the bed. Divesting herself of the pale yellow gown and the ruffled petticoats, she threw them to one side. Dressing herself in the threadbare shirt and the rough breeches, she bundled her long hair beneath the cap, put on the thick coat, and walked firmly to the door. Guiltily she remembered that she had not been alert for the signal. Even so, she told herself, if the light had flashed a warning to keep away, she would surely have seen it. Even now, Richard would be waiting for her, depending on the small amount of help she could give him. Poor Richard! She could never now regard him as anything more than a friend. Under the circumstances, which were no fault of his, the least she could do was give him her loyalty and render what help she could.

Descending the stairs, Sin caught a glimpse of a small bundled figure crossing the hall. Perplexed, he drew back into the shadow of the stairwell, watching as the figure reached the door and fumbled with the lock.

With the opening of the door, wind pounced into the hall, causing the candle flames to flicker and the curtains on either side of the door to billow. With a last furtive look around, the figure stepped outside and drew the door softly shut.

Sin drew in his breath sharply. Annaliza, by God! There was no disguising that piquant profile. What was she doing in that rough getup, and what the devil was she up to? A gleam entered Sin's eyes. Since his curiosity would certainly not permit him to sleep, why not follow her and find out? He hesitated only momentarily; then, his mind made up, he whirled and raced back up the stairs.

Melton, engaged in laying out his master's nightclothes, looked up, startled, as his lordship burst into the room. "Is something wrong, m'lord?" he ventured.

"Nothing," Sin answered. "I'm going for a walk."

Melton stared as Sin pulled a coat from the closet and hastily donned it. "A walk, m'lord?" he said feebly. "That

ain't like you at all, if I may say so. Never known you to walk when you could ride, m'lord."

Sin strode over to the door. "Nonsense!" he said impatiently. "I enjoy walking. Don't wait up for me, Melton." The door banged shut behind him.

Melton sat down on the edge of the bed, his gloomy eyes contemplating the flowered carpet. Sighing, he shook his head. His lordship had gone walking! A thing unheard of in London, where people were civilized. It must be that the sea air had stirred up his lordship's brain. Another thing, he seemed uncommonly interested in the reverend's daughter, who was not his type at all. No good could come of that. If he knew anything about his lordship, and he most certainly did, he would ravish the poor little wench, and then leave her weeping. Oh, he was a rum one, was Lord Sin. A good master to work for, but a devil with the ladies. It wasn't to be wondered at, really, with the way females threw themselves at him.

Melton's lips pursed to a prim line. His lordship would no doubt be tired and irritable when he came in. Likely he would blame him for going to bed, even though it had been at his order. He could just hear him now. "Melton, what the devil do you mean by snoring in your bed? Am I supposed to do your work for you, damned lazy hound that you are?" Funny that was, and sort of disheartening, the way the gentry had of blaming their servants when their consciences got to pricking. Talking of conscience, if he were the betting man that Liberty libelously called him, he'd lay heavy odds that there was more to his lordship's whim than an innocent walk. He had not the slightest doubt about that.

Melton sighed. He'd been through an experience or two with his master, that he had. There were times, though, when his lordship laid into him with his cutting and sarcastic tongue, that he suspected that his lordship was not so much angry with him as deliberately trying to strike sparks for his own private amusement. It might be said that he knew his lordship, and yet he didn't. In all truth, you never really knew how to take him.

Melton rose from the bed, his pursed mouth relaxing into a smile. Maybe his lordship had got himself a mermaid on the side. He would put nothing past him. His gloom entirely dispersed, Melton chuckled. A proper lad, he was, and a shocking philanderer, yet for all his sometimes trying ways, there was something about him that you just couldn't help liking,

even admiring. Liberty, for instance, was an example of this. She had a sharp tongue, and she was frequently heard to denounce Lord Sinclair's wicked ways, but nevertheless, it was apparent that she adored him.

Conquering a twinge of jealousy at this last thought, Melton made his way to the door. At this hour, if he was not mistaken, Liberty would be in bed, reading her Bible. It might be, if he was tactful, that she could be persuaded to give him a good-night kiss. Hesitantly he touched his swollen eye. It was still tender, but it did not twinge with blinding pain as it had done before. At the time of the injury, he had been quite sure that he was fated to lose the sight of that particular orb. Fortunately, such had not proved to be the case. However, keeping the lesson of his eye in mind, he must be careful not to alarm Liberty. He must not by word or deed insult her virginity, or she was quite capable of landing him a clout that would fuddle his brain and have his ears ringing for at least a week. Terrible was his Liberty when she was aroused.

His injured eye watering, and his good one glowing with a tender light, Melton left the room and made his way to that part of the house where his love innocently reposed in her chaste bed.

13



"Have a drink, my lovely." Annaliza started as Ned Soames's slurred voice spoke in her ear. His meaty hand, clutching a tin cup, advanced toward her. "Go on, wench, drink up," Soames coaxed.

Annaliza looked sharply at the bottle held in his other hand. "Where did you get it?" she asked.

Soames shrugged. "There was one or two bottles left over from the last haul. This one's part of my share. Good French brandy it is. It'll put life into you."

"If Richard catches you drinking on the job, there will be trouble," she reminded him. "He expects a clear head at all times."

"Do he, now?" Soames sneered. "Ain't that just too bloody bad about what he expects? Remind me to break my heart about that, when I got the time."

"You chose him for your leader," Annaliza flashed. "The least you can do is be loyal and carry out his orders."

Soames rocked back on his heels; then, turning his head, he blinked owlishly at the other men seated in the cave. "Listen to her, fellers. We chose him, she says."

"Shut up, Soames," a gruff voice called. "Be careful of what you're saying. There'll be hell to pay if he finds out."

Soames turned his flushed face to Annaliza. "Well, never mind about who chose who. The thing is, girlie, he ain't here. Late, he is. If we got to stay in this cave cooling our heels, I got a right to drink, and a right to offer my pals a drink." He thrust the cup at her again. "Here."

"No, thank you." Annaliza turned away. Of all the men who worked with Richard, she particularly detested the big, blond, loose-lipped Soames. There was something frighteningly malicious about his hard blue stare. Soames, whose title

in the organization was "the Lander," was responsible for the unloading of contraband. Later, when the cargo had been sorted, he must see to it that there were sufficient ponies and wagons to carry the bales and boxes and kegs to the various points of destination. The Batsmen were already outside, armed with cudgels and firearms, deployed in strategic positions as they awaited the landing of the smuggling craft, but although the Batsmen might be alert for an attack by the revenuers, there were two things wrong with this run. Richard was not yet here, and Soames at this present moment seemed hardly capable of handling his job. She glanced toward the mouth of the cave, hoping that Richard would soon arrive and quell the obnoxious Soames.

Noting the direction of her gaze, Soames twisted his lips in a mirthless smile. "Even though the Smiling Monster ain't seen fit to give greeting to his mates, he's out there somewhere close at hand, always is. You can bet your little bustle on that."

Annaliza flushed. "Then you'd better be careful, Soames. Richard may have to tread warily with you men, but if you continue to address me so disrespectfully, he'll do something about it."

"And what's disrespectful about offering you a drink, girlie?"

"Nothing." Annaliza turned to look at him fully, her sherry-colored eyes flashing defiance. "It's your tone, your manner. I don't like it, and Richard won't either."

Soames waved the bottle. "Houghty-toughty! Your precious Richard ain't got no time for your troubles, Annie gal. If he's out there, and I know he is, he's watching for sight of the craft. He'll be deaf and blind to anything else, take my word for it."

"I wouldn't take your word for anything, Soames," Annaliza retorted contemptuously. "I cannot imagine why you have the position of Lander. In my opinion, you are not to be relied on."

"That so?" Soames's laughter was ugly. "Now, you let me tell you something, Miss High and Mighty. The Smiling Monster ain't in love with you, not nohow, he ain't. Only reason he's marrying you is 'cause he wants to turn respectable. Why, if you wasn't a reverend's daughter, he'd let us throw you over on your back and all have a turn prodding inside you. He'd just look on, and you know something, he wouldn't care one pink hoot in hell. You ain't his type, my lovely. Big

tits is what he likes. Aye, big tits and a big rear end. Funny that way, he is." He grinned as his malicious eyes took in Annaliza's blanched face. "Likes to sink down on all that soft flesh, he do. Pity them big women ain't got tits that stretch. 'Cause if they did stretch, he could have a nipple stuck all nice in his mouth, sucking on it while he prodded the wench to hell and back."

Annaliza found her voice. "Liar!" she shouted furiously. "Keep your filthy mouth shut!"

Soames's grin stretched wider. "It's gospel truth, Annie. Likes an audience 'n' all, he does. I mind that time when we went to Madam Bertha's whorehouse. I was his audience that time. Madam knew the Smiling Monster's tastes, so she picked him out a girl named Clara. Biggest bitch I ever did see, was that Clara. Had tits on her larger than melons. My word, but he had himself a good time with Clara! What with the grabbing and the grunting and the suckling, he was pretty near wore out by the time he slid down her big mountain of a belly and got himself inside her."

"Shut up!" Annaliza's voice shook. "Don't dare say another word!"

Soames took a swig from the cup. "Ah!" he exclaimed, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "That's better." He turned his head to look at the men seated along the cave walls. "Ain't that right, what I told her? Speak up."

Ted Anderson, a small, wiry man with thinning gray hair and fierce blue eyes, scowled at him. "Why don't you do like the lady says, Ned? Keep your blabbermouth shut. You know what he's like. You know what he'll do to you if he hears you."

Soames glared at him. "Sure I know. I've been with him longer'n any of you. But I ain't afraid of him no more. I'd smash him over the head with this bottle as soon as look at him, and don't you think I wouldn't."

Bewildered, Annaliza looked from one to the other. "I don't understand. If anyone has cause to fear, surely it is Richard?"

"Of course, miss, of course," another man chimed in hastily. "Don't take no notice of Soames, it's the brandy talk-ing. Pot valiant, he is, and he don't know what he's saying."

"I know, all right," Soames growled truculently. "Told you I ain't afraid of Monster Manford, and I meant it."

"Always have been," Ted Anderson put in quietly. "I seen

you cringing to him like a whipped puppy. I don't know that anything has changed."

"But you don't know everything, Anderson. Told you I never murdered that woman in London, but none of you believed me. So now that paper the Monster holds on me don't mean a thing."

Anderson glanced swiftly at Annaliza as Soames paused for breath. He saw the horror in her face, the dawning of understanding in her eyes. "It is the other way round," she breathed. "It is Richard who menaces you?"

Anderson looked away, but the slight inclination of his head was a silent agreement. "Tell us about it, Soames," Anderson said.

"Sure I'll tell you. I was saving it, but you might as well know now." He glanced triumphantly at the interested faces turned his way. "The fellow that did that woman in has just died, but before he died he confessed to the murder. I met some pals of mine in Truro the other day—it was them that told me. I'm as free as a bird. I can go where I like and do what I like. The Monster ain't got nothing on me no more."

"If that's so, Ned," Jim Butler chimed in, "what are you doing here? Why ain't you lit out?"

Soames grinned. "Because I want to fill my pockets before I scarper. I need my share of this haul. After that, you won't see me for dust."

Annaliza's head whirled as the men began talking together in low, excited voices. She heard their comments on Richard's cruelty, his ruthlessness, the knowledge he held of their past misdeeds, knowledge that was locked away somewhere, and which he would not hesitate to use should any one of them attempt to leave the organization. Of course, she thought, it all fitted in. How could she have been so blind, such a credulous fool? The things she was hearing now explained so many things about Richard that had puzzled her. For instance, the uneasy feeling she had had that he was two men in one. The look in the eyes of the men whenever he was near. She had convinced herself that that look was baleful, when all the time it had been hatred and fear that stared from their eyes. The "Smiling Monster," they called Richard. She had believed, because they were the criminals, that they called him that in derision, but now she understood that he had earned the name. He was a monster! Behind that innocent look and the warm smile there dwelt a hard and evil man.

Annaliza's hand closed around a jutting spar of rock, and

she did not feel the stinging pain of the rough stone. Her mind staggering with shock, she made an attempt to refute the truth of what she had heard. The next moment, contemptuous of the feminine fears that bade her make excuses for Richard Manford, she cleared her mind of lingering doubts. Except with Richard, who now appeared to be a master at deception, she knew the truth when she heard it.

The huddled men had forgotten her, Annaliza thought, or they would not be talking so unguardedly among themselves. Stealthily she began to back toward the entrance. If she encountered Richard, she would be forced to make an excuse. She would tell him that she felt unwell, anything, so that she could get away. If she could once reach the safety of her home, she would make sure that she never met with Richard Manford again. As for the things she had heard this night, she would put them completely out of her mind. Even now, although she had been so disillusioned in Richard, she had no wish to betray him or his men. All she wanted was a chance to forget the whole thing, especially her foolish, naive part in it.

"You stop right where you are, young missy." Tom Atkins' growling voice halted Annaliza. Rising to his feet, Atkins came toward her, a thin, swarthy man with narrow, glittering black eyes. "We been fools talking like we done in front of the likes of you. Well, too late to mend that. But the thing is, you ain't going out there to spill what you heard to Manford."

Annaliza's heart lurched. The menace in Atkins' face was reflected in the faces of all the men. Forcing herself not to show fear, she said in a cold, controlled voice, "You needn't worry about me. I will tell him nothing. I will go home and forget I ever knew you."

"But you ain't going home, miss. Not yet, that is." Robbie Beaton got up and came to range himself on her other side. "You're going to do your job like always, just so Manford don't smell a rat. And you ain't going to say a word to him, not a single perishing word." Beaton advanced his face close to Annaliza's, so close that she caught the faintly sour odor of his breath. "Because if you do open up that pretty little yapper of yours, something terrible will happen. Like me to tell you what it'll be?"

Annaliza stared at him with the fascination of horror. "I . . . I think I know," she stammered. "You w-will kill me."

Beaton's wide grin exposed uneven, faintly yellowed teeth.

"Ain't nothing wrong with your intelligence, miss. Sure we'd kill you, but before we got around to that, we'd arrange a nasty little accident for that holy daddy of yours. Real shame that would be. I ain't got nothing against your daddy, I've always considered him a nice gentleman. He's always got a nod and a smile for me when I pass him in the village. It'd upset me to cut off his breathing, but I'd do it in a tick. Don't you make no mistake about that."

Annaliza felt nauseated by the frantic beating of her heart. "You . . . you wouldn't!" she gasped.

"I'll do it if I have to. Still, if you behave yourself nice and pretty, he'll be safe enough. Up to you, ain't it?"

"What is it you want of me?"

"Well, it's like this, miss. You try doing us down, and it won't be long before we get to your daddy. Slit him up nice and neat, we will. A butcher'd be proud to do such a job."

"But we'll be attending your daddy's funeral," Atkins put in. "We'll be sitting right alongside, mourning with you. Ain't that right, fellows?"

A murmur of assent came from the seated men. "We won't let you down, miss," Jim Carley called. "We'll be at your funeral, too. You ain't got a thing to worry about."

"You hear that, miss?" Atkins said. "Ain't that nice of the fellows? We'll give you as good a sendoff as your daddy's." He looked at Beaton. "When's the lass's funeral to be?"

Beaton winked. "We got to give her time to grieve for her daddy. Not too much time, though."

"How dare you threaten me!" There was a thin note of hysteria in Annaliza's voice. "I have told you I will say nothing. If you will not take my word, then I can think of nothing else to reassure you."

"Your word!" Beaton exclaimed contemptuously. "And you and Manford as thick as thieves."

"Not anymore," Annaliza said desperately. "After what I heard here, I want nothing more to do with him, or with any of you."

"Talk's cheap, miss. All you've got to remember is that we'll be watching you close. You bear that in mind. If we go down on account of you, one of us'll get to you and your daddy." Beaton took Annaliza's wrist between his fingers. "For your sake, miss," he added, tightening his grip, "I hope you got a good memory."

"I have an excellent memory." Annaliza pulled her wrist free from Beaton's hot grasp. If these men had meant to ter-

rify her, they had succeeded. Still trying, for the sake of her pride, to hide her fear, she hoped, by putting on a bold front, to prove herself mistress of the situation. "If you think I'd do anything to place my father in danger," she said in a level voice, "then you don't know me very well. You have nothing to fear from me. You are simply wasting your time by threatening me."

"That so?" Beaton drawled, unimpressed. "Time will show, won't it, miss?"

Annaliza made a gesture of impatience. "I don't know how many times you want me to repeat it, but I will tell you once more. I will say nothing." Her eyes dwelt on Soames's flushed, leering face. "If anyone informs on you," she said meaningfully, "it won't be me."

Soames's flush deepened. "Here! What you looking at me for? What you getting at, you bloody little snip?"

Annaliza regarded him unflinchingly. "What do you think I'm getting at, Soames?" she countered.

Soames's hard blue gaze swept the intent, suddenly suspicious faces of his companions. "This bitch ain't making no sense to me. What about you? You understand what she's up to?"

"She means you wouldn't have nothing to lose by selling us out," Atkins said in a dangerous voice. "That's a thought, that is, Soames. You're getting clear of this mess, ain't you?"

"And why the hell would I want to shop you? Everyone here, except the bitch, is a pal of mine."

"That's as may be," Beaton put in. "But there ain't no denying that you hate Manford, same as we all do. If you was to strike at him, you'd be striking at us, for we'd be nobbled right along with him."

"Don't you think I know that, Beaton?" Soames pointed an accusing finger at Annaliza. "She's a troublemaker, that one, and if you can't see that, you're off your heads. She's a blabberer, too. She'll tell Manford, sure as shooting, but she's hoping you'll think it's me what done it. Can't you see that?"

Atkins gave Soames a long, penetrating look. "You've cleared yourself with me, Soames. Don't know about the rest, but I'm satisfied." His gaze turned to Annaliza. "We ain't none of us fools, miss, and don't you think it. If anyone talks, we'll know who it is."

Soames smiled triumphantly as a chorus of voices supported Atkins' statement. "Bloody bitch, thinking she could put

one over on me! I'll be glad to be out of this lark, I admit it, but I know how to keep secrets. Closemouthed, that's me."

"Always have been, Soames," Atkins said.

"And always will be. I'll tell you something, Atkins. If I could do Manford down, I would, but there ain't no way without letting you fellows in for it, so as far as I'm concerned, Manford goes scot free. The minute I'm away from here, I'll forget the lot of you. How's that sit with you?"

"I ain't worried none about you, Soames," Tom Middleton said. "You ain't about to throw yourself in the fire along with the rest of us, just to nobble Manford." He eyed Soames keenly. "Don't need to tell you that you'd be in the fire too, do I, Soames? We wouldn't go down without naming names."

Soames glared at him. "Shut your trap, Middleton! I've said my piece. If you ain't satisfied, why don't you come right out and say so, instead of hinting around?"

Middleton laughed. "I'm satisfied, just reminding you, that's all."

"Don't need no reminder."

"In that case, let's forget it." Middleton winked at him. "Always keep on the right side of the man what's got the bottle, I say, and that's you, Soames. So how about sharing the wealth? I could do with some of that brandy. Fair perished with the cold, I am."

Soames's truculent expression faded. "The bottle's still three-quarters full," he answered, his good nature restored. "You can share it out among you as soon as the wench has had a drink." Grinning maliciously, Soames swaggered toward Annaliza. "What say, girlie? You going to have a celebration drink with me? Don't matter to me that you was trying to do me dirt, I don't bear you no malice."

Annaliza stared at him haughtily. "Don't you, Soames? I doubt that."

Soames's eyes narrowed slightly. "Never mind the smart talk. I'm asking you to have a drink."

All Annaliza's dislike of the man surfaced. Her face hard and set, she turned away. "I don't drink with pigs!" The unconsidered words burst from her.

The jeering laughter that came from the men caused the hot blood of fury to rush into Soames's face. "That's you told off, Soames," Tim Hilton cried. "The little lady's really put you in your place, ain't she? What you going to do about it, eh?"

Ignoring the catcalls and the various lewd suggestions that

followed this remark, Soames glared at Annaliza. "Call me a pig, would you, you slut!" Grabbing her, he swung her round to face him. "We'll see what you got to say when I'm finished with you!"

Annaliza struggled wildly, clawing at him, doing her best to injure him with her kicking feet. A blow to her head subdued her, and she sagged in his grasp, trying to recover her breath for a fresh assault. She gave a scream of protest as Soames, following up his advantage, thrust the neck of the bottle bruisingly against her lips. "Open up, girlie." His brutal fingers pried her mouth open. "There! That's good brandy, ain't it?"

Annaliza gagged as the fiery liquor invaded her mouth and trickled down her throat. Gasping, her eyes watering, she pushed at him ineffectually. "Don't!" She managed to force out the word.

"You heard the lady," a clipped voice carrying a hard note of command said. "My dear fellow, unless you are absolutely craving for a bullet between your eyes, you will release her at once."

Sin's voice! Annaliza stood there unmoving, frozen with shock as Soames's hands dropped away from her. Oh, God! He had followed her. But Richard and the posted lookouts must already be assembled. They must have spotted Sin. Unless something had gone seriously wrong, they would never have allowed him to pass.

"Get over here, Annaliza." Sin's voice sounded again.

Still feeling that she was dreaming, Annaliza turned and moved slowly toward him. Sin stood in the entrance of the cave. As always, his manner was negligent, but Annaliza noted that his dark eyes were hard and wary. He held a small pistol in his hand, a delicate thing of chased silver, and it was pointed straight at Soames. Behind Soames, the startled men muttered uneasily among themselves. "I wouldn't!" Sin snapped as Soames started forward. "Lest any of you men be laboring under a misapprehension, this little toy is more powerful than it looks, and I know how to use it. I am accounted a first-class shot."

"Toy is right!" Soames snarled. "How many of us do you think you can take with that popgun?"

Sin's slow dawning smile mocked the man's baffled fury. "Enough of you to make it count," he answered. "It is not a question of how many, you see. A more appropriate question would be this. Which of you would care to receive the first

bullet? The way I see it, a man usually has a great respect for his own skin, and I assure you, my burly friend, that I would use up all of these deadly little pellets before I went down."

"Would you now?" Soames blustered. "That's big talk coming from a bloody swell! Think you got it all figured out, don't you? What if we was to rush you?"

Sin's elevated brows were as mocking as his faint smile. "You are welcome to try, of course," he drawled. "But the same question arises, does it not? Which of you would care to lead the charge?"

Annaliza felt a pang of admiration. The sheer effrontery of him! Sin must know that he didn't stand a chance if the men chose to ignore the danger and join forces. It would not be the first time they had risked stray bullets. Yet there Sin stood, cool, disdainful, subduing them by sheer force of will. Surely he did not seriously believe that he could hold them off for much longer. "S-Sin," Annaliza stammered, "you have walked into a t-trap. How the devil did you manage to slip past the men outside?"

"I saw no men," Sin answered, his dark brows drawing together. "But then, of course, my attention was all on you. I watched you turn in here, waited for a while, and then followed you."

"The men are out there," Annaliza insisted desperately. "If you didn't see them, it is because they didn't want you to. But they are there."

"I'll take your word for it."

"You had best do exactly that," Annaliza answered grimly. She cast a defiant look at Soames, who was watching her intently. "You can have no idea, Sin, of whom you are dealing with."

"Not being exactly a dullard," Sin answered, his eyes still fixed on Soames, "I have a very good idea of why these men are gathered here." He glanced at Annaliza briefly. "As for you, you little fool, how could you get yourself mixed up in a smuggling operation?"

Fear prodding her, Annaliza abruptly lost her temper. "I am no longer mixed up in it. I have resigned as of tonight. Does that satisfy you? In any case, it is no business of yours what I do!"

"I am making it my business," Sin said calmly.

"Sin! For God's sake! You don't know what you have done. You don't think they'll allow you to just walk away, do you? What are we going to do?"

"We?"

"Yes, we. Didn't I just tell you that I'm finished with it?" Annaliza added impatiently. She turned her head to look at the men. They stared back at her, their expressions menacing. At any moment they would make their move. "Oh, Sin! Why did you have to follow me? If you had minded your own business, everything would have been all right."

Sin shrugged. "Don't worry. I'll get us out of here."

Annaliza bit her lip. "How?" She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Do you have a plan?"

Sin frowned. Despite his encouraging words, he found himself at something of a loss. If, as Annaliza said, there were men outside, then they were fairly trapped. Another lightning glance gave him a glimpse of Annaliza's white face and frightened eyes. "I don't have a plan," he whispered back. "But you can be sure that I'll think of something."

Soames listened to the murmur of their voices, but he could not make out the words. Obviously they were cooking up some plan, but whatever it was, it wouldn't do them any good. They could scrag the swell here, or Manford and the other men waiting outside could do it. It made no difference. Either way, once Manford set eyes on him, the swell wouldn't have much longer to live. Manford would knock him on the head and throw him into the sea, which was usually his way of getting rid of a threatening danger. Well, two could play at that game, Soames thought with an inner smile. If he had the chance, he'd see to it that the uppity bitch met with a like accident.

Soames looked from Annaliza to Sin. His envious, hating eyes took in the impeccable cut of his clothing, the snowy ruffles at wrists and throat, the plain gold ring on the steady hand holding the gun, the dark rich gleam of a ruby in a heavy gold setting that adorned the middle finger of the hand that rested lightly on Annaliza's shoulder. A swell of the first water, was this one, Soames thought, and as out-of-place as a peacock in a barnyard. Unmistakably an aristocrat, the man fairly breathed wealth and power. He was everything, in fact, that he, Alfred Soames, had always longed to be. A blue blood, a prince of fashion, someone who had absolute power over others. The man standing before him gave that impression, and he had not the slightest doubt that he wielded just such a power.

Soames looked at the ringed hands again. Before Manford consigned the swell to the sea, he would strip him of those

rings and of anything else that might identify him too quickly. Manford was fond of finger jewelry. He would let a few months go by, until he considered danger to be past, and then he would be flashing the swell's rings on his own fingers. Manford, who was so careful about most things, was careless with what he called "the trifles." But it had been Soames's experience that trifles could add up to one big whole. So if ever Manford should end up dangling at the end of a rope, it would be because he had overlooked the seemingly unimportant trifles.

Coming out of his reflection, Soames looked up and met Sin's eyes. In a rush of renewed anger, he echoed the thoughts that had been in Annaliza's mind. "How the hell did you manage to slip past the men?" he said roughly.

"It was tolerably easy." Sin's careless voice pricked at the other man. "There was no one out there, you see." His quizzing gaze swept the faces turned his way. "Were you expecting the leader of the smugglers to challenge me?" He paused, and then added in light mockery, "By that I mean your leader, of course."

Soames, who had not heard the low-toned conversation between Sin and Annaliza, took an impetuous step forward, only to be halted by the gun. "What the hell do you mean by that?" he barked, his eyes glaring with anger. "You accusing us of being smugglers, you dressed-up popinjay!"

Sin appeared to consider this. "Yes," he said after a moment, "I rather think I am."

Annaliza drew in a sharp breath as the men began to rise to their feet and crowd behind Soames. Sin's deliberate goading of the men had convinced her that he wanted them to attack. Why? Did he hope, in the resulting melee, that they would both manage to slip away? Or was he seeking a fight in order to draw attention away from her? At this last thought, Annaliza's mouth set firmly. If he had the idea that she would scuttle off like a coward, leaving him to fight his way out as best he could, she would show him that he was mistaken. "Sin . . ." She touched his sleeve with tense fingers. "Don't say any more, please."

"That's very good advice," Manford's voice said from behind Sin. "It's a pity it came too late to do you any good, Master Spy."

"He's not!" Annaliza exclaimed. "Richard, you don't—"

"Be quiet, Annaliza!" Sin interrupted curtly.

Manford's pistol prodded hard into Sin's back. "That's

right, Annaliza," he jeered. "Be quiet. Soames, don't stand there gaping, fool! Take that dinky gun away from him, and step lively about it!"

Shrugging, Sin surrendered the weapon to Soames. "My mistake," he said with a rueful smile at Annaliza. "I should have remembered to guard my back."

"No need to feel badly about that," Manford said in a hard voice. "In any case, you wouldn't have been allowed to get away. You see, I was aware of you long before you entered the cave."

"Ah! Skulking in the shadows, were you?"

"Call it what you please," Manford answered in a tight voice. "Unfortunately for you, your every action was observed."

"Really? But how delightfully sinister and melodramatic you make that sound. I wonder you have not thought of taking up a stage career."

"Shut up!"

"Certainly. If you insist." His hands lifting slightly, Sin turned slowly to face Manford. "Unless I am mistaken," he said in a cool voice, "you would be the leader of this unsavory-looking gang of ruffians. Correct?"

"Correct." Manford's narrowed eyes glittered. "Not that the information is any use to you. You won't live to pass it on."

"Too bad," Sin murmured.

"Isn't it, though?" Keeping the pistol leveled, Manford moved forward into the full light of the flaring torches. "Recognize me? I'm sure you'll remember that we've met before."

Sin did not answer at once. He studied Manford curiously. The hand that held the pistol was shaking slightly. Manford's fair skin was flushed, and despite the chill of the evening, beads of perspiration had formed on his face, dampening the strands of blond hair that fell over his forehead. His attention appeared to be concentrated on him, Sin thought, and yet he knew that it was not. The man appeared to have a great deal on his mind. His head was held at a listening angle, and his blue eyes constantly darted toward the entrance of the cave. Sin's mouth set grimly. It was true that he knew little about smuggling and the men who engaged in it, but it was not hard to guess that these men had gathered together in expectation of a smuggling craft. Even had he been a dullard, their menacing attitudes would have convinced him that something of the sort was afoot. Had something gone wrong? he won-

dered. Were they expecting trouble? He flicked a look at Annaliza. Her eyes were fixed on the pistol in the blond man's hand, and she was trembling visibly. Sin gritted his teeth together. That damned little fool! he thought with a surge of rage. If he could manage to get them out of this situation, he would give Annaliza Sedgewick the thrashing of her life. He would be doing the reverend a favor if he beat some sense into her head. She was the most infuriating wench that it had ever been his ill fortune to come across, and so unexpected that she constantly kept him off balance. A hard bitch at one moment, soft and melting the next. If he . . . Sin's thoughts broke off as the blond man's eyes once more fixed themselves upon his face. "I asked you a question," Manford rapped.

"So you did." Sin's amiable tone belied his angry, seething emotion. "Er . . . what was it?"

"I asked if you remembered our last meeting?" Manford said impatiently.

"If it matters, I do remember," Sin answered. "But then, of course, I could scarcely forget a man who had attempted to brain me. That kind of thing is apt to leave a lasting impression."

Manford glowered at him. He was accustomed to inspiring fear, and the arrogance of this cool, assured man grated unbearably. "I should have killed you then," he snapped. "The moment I set eyes on you, I had the feeling that you meant trouble."

"And your instinct was right." Sin's amiable smile matched his tone. "Should I be presented with the opportunity, my dear fellow, I will cause you more trouble than you have ever known before. I promise you that."

Stung, Manford raised his voice. "I wish I had killed you. But no matter, that is something that can be remedied."

"Exactly. It is better this way, for now you have the pleasure to come. So much more satisfying, don't you think?"

Manford felt a flicker of reluctant admiration. He knew what the man was about. He was trying to make him lose control, believing that he would then be able to seize the advantage. But if he thought that would happen, he didn't know Richard Manford. "You're a cool customer, and no mistake. But you won't talk your way out of this, so save your breath." He glanced at the grinning Soames. "Soames, get yourself and your men outside. The cutter should have been in sight long since." He hesitated. "Best keep alert for trouble."

The grin faded from Soames's face. "Why do you say that?" he asked uneasily. "Have you maybe heard something?"

"Fool! If I had the slightest expectation of trouble, we wouldn't be here, would we?"

"But you said to keep alert," Soames persisted. "Why'd you say it if you ain't heard nothing?"

Annoyed that he should dare to question him, Manford glared at Soames balefully. "The cutter is late in rendezvousing, which might or might not mean trouble. Now, get out!"

"I don't want to get mixed up in anything," Soames mumbled.

"What was that?"

Soames raised his voice. "I said I don't want to get mixed up in anything. Especially now."

"Especially now?" Manford darted him a sharp look of inquiry. "And what does that mean?"

Flushing, Soames avoided his eyes. "Don't matter now. I'll tell you after the run."

Manford shrugged indifferently. "Just as long as you do what's expected of you."

"Always do, don't I?" Soames nodded toward Sin. "What about the swell?"

"You can leave him to me."

"Hope so. But if I've summed him up right, he's a slippery one. Best watch him." Soames shambled toward the entrance, followed by the other men. "I'll be getting 'em into position."

"Be quick about it, then. Higgins, you stay behind. Knock our spy over the head, and then tie him up. I'll deal with him later."

"No, Richard, you can't!" Annaliza sprang forward to intercept Higgins. "I've told you that he is no spy. Just look at him!" She forced contempt into her voice. "He's one of the useless dandy set, and he's no more threat to you than a fly. Do you think a man of his stamp would allow himself to become involved in anything that might cause him a moment's unpleasantness?"

Manford gave her a look of contempt. "You're running true to form, my love. You've never been any good at judging a man's character."

"I've had experience with him, Richard, and I think I can say I know him. He's only concerned with himself and his own pleasure."

Sin smiled. "How true," he murmured.

Annaliza ignored him. "Let him go, Richard. You'll be doing yourself a service."

"I will say what is to be done," Manford answered her coldly. "Higgins, push her out of the way."

"No!" Annaliza rounded on the startled Higgins. "Don't you dare to move. I've got something to say to Richard, and he's going to hear it."

"I can fight my own battles, little one," Sin interposed quietly. "Surprising though it may seem to you, I don't need you to defend me."

"Defend you?" Annaliza stared at him in outrage. "Is that what you think I'm doing? I couldn't care less about you. It's just that I don't happen to believe in senseless murder."

"Annaliza," Sin said pleasantly, "you will close your mouth, please."

"I don't please!" Annaliza directed a burning look at him. "I will not stand by and see you killed. I refuse to have you on my conscience!"

Manford's eyes went from one to the other. "If you know something about this man, Annaliza, you had best speak up."

Annaliza's heartbeat accelerated. Damn Sin! Damn the inquisitive nature that had made him follow her, his mockery, his sarcasm, his cool refusal to acknowledge danger or to make the least push to help himself. Oh, but she loved him! She would die if Richard carried out his threat. Avoiding Sin's eyes, she said huskily, "I should know something about him, and what I know, I don't like. In my opinion he is despicable, but in all fairness, he is no spy."

"Good of you to say so," Sin murmured.

"Will you shut up!" Annaliza stamped her foot. "Richard, he is Lord Jonathan Sinclair. He is a guest in my father's home."

Manford's eyes widened slightly. "Lord Jonathan Sinclair," he repeated. "I've heard of him."

"Who has not?" Annaliza put in. "He is a lecher, a ne'er-do-well, but he is certainly no spy."

"Yes," Manford said in a musing voice, "I remember that he told me his name, but I did not make the connection at the time."

"Well, now you know," Annaliza said triumphantly. "And you also know that you have nothing to fear from him."

"Your Richard may not," Sin said softly. "But you, little one, have a great deal to fear from me."

Manford's face darkened with sudden suspicion. "Despite your apparent contempt, you seem quite heated in his defense, Annaliza. What is he to you?"

"How can you ask me that!" Annaliza cried, hoping that her voice carried conviction. "What could a man like him ever be to me? I hate his type, and my one wish is to be rid of him. But not by murder, Richard. Not that!"

Encountering Sin's mocking, faintly amused smile, Manford was goaded into anger. "You do wrong to take me for a fool, Annaliza, as I thought you would have known by now." His voice had risen, and bright color stained his pale, freckled cheeks. "I don't appreciate your pleading for this man."

Annaliza stared at him. "Surely it is obvious to you why I plead, if you like to call it that. Think, Richard! There will be a terrible turmoil if you kill him. No matter what I may personally think of him, Lord Sinclair is an important man. He has connections in high places, the Prince of Wales is his best friend. It is too dangerous. You must understand that!"

Manford's face changed. "Yes, for once you're right, Annaliza," he said thoughtfully. "That does rather change things."

Annaliza drew in a deep, relieved breath. "Then . . . then you'll let him go?" she said shakily.

Manford shook his head. "I will not, my dear, but I won't kill him. I promise you that. I'll stow him away until I've thought what to do with him."

"But why? I don't understand."

"You may not understand, Annaliza," Sin said quietly, "but I do. Our friend here has thought to good purpose, and he has come to the conclusion that holding me for ransom is more profitable than murder." He glanced at Manford. "Am I right?"

"You are, my lord." Manford sneered. "I'll say this much for you, you catch on quickly."

"With certain mentalities, it is not too hard to follow the thought processes. However, I think I should tell you that you won't get away with it."

"Really, my lord? And what makes you think that?"

"Because I know the people with whom you will be dealing. I very much fear that all you will receive for your trouble is a nice neat rope collar. Yes, you will dangle. A fitting end for you, I think."

Manford took an impulsive step toward Sin, and then

checked himself. Sinclair was waiting for him to lose his head, but damned if he'd oblige him. "That will be enough out of you," he said coldly. "You seem to forget that I could change my mind about killing you."

"You could kill me," Sin agreed, "but you won't. At least, not yet. I can read your mind, friend, and I find it grubby reading. Just as a matter of interest, how much do you expect to get for me?"

"Richard, you can't do this!" Annaliza cried. "You're not really going to do it, are you?"

"No, of course not, you dolt!" Manford fumed. "I'm going to give him a nice kiss and send him on his way with my blessing. Fool! It's not often we get such a fine bird for the plucking."

Annaliza was stunned, outraged. For the first time Richard had revealed himself, and she sensed that there would be no going back from this moment. Swallowing her fury, she thought swiftly. If she was to find the means to help Sin, she must pretend to agree with Richard, but she must do it reluctantly, or his suspicions would be aroused again. "I can't pretend to approve of this," she said in a low voice. "I don't think you should do it. It's too dangerous."

Manford gave her a lowering look. "I know what I'm doing, and I don't need your approval."

"You . . . you really think you can pull it off?"

"I don't think, I know. Why do you ask? Do you approve of the scheme now?"

"Oh, no," Annaliza said hastily. "You could not really expect me to approve." She paused, then added wistfully, "But still, I have heard that Lord Sinclair is the second-richest man in England. If that is true, then he has more money than he could spend in a lifetime."

Manford gave a hard laugh. "When greed steps into the picture, the preacher's daughter vanishes, eh?"

"I am not greedy," Annaliza said in a hurt voice. "It's just that I would like to have a few pretty things for a change. Richard, you don't intend to hurt him, do you? I mean, you will let him go when the ransom is paid?"

"That depends on him. If he behaves himself, he'll get away with a whole skin."

Annaliza felt a thrill of triumph. She had convinced him. "Then perhaps it will be all right," she said in a hesitant voice.

Sin saw Manford's smile, and he was amazed. The man

must be lacking in wit if he could not see through Annaliza's very unconvincing act. He had once heard that even the most brilliant of men had their blind spots, so perhaps it was not so very surprising that Manford had been gulled. Hoping to help Annaliza's act along, he said in a harsh voice, "I've met some brazen bitches in my time, and you really top the list. You don't approve, you say, but you're willing to smother your disapproval to get your hands on my money. My God, you disgust me! You're fully as bad as your friend here. No, I take that back. You're worse. He, at least, is honest in his intentions, but you hide behind a mock piety."

"That's not true!" Annaliza denied the charge in a quivering voice. Encountering the sudden flame in her eyes, Sin almost laughed aloud. Poor Annaliza, she was trying to put on such a good show for his benefit, but she was not sure if he really understood or if he had meant the words he had just uttered. And if it came to that, Sin thought with a sudden qualm of doubt, how did he know she was merely putting on a show? Instantly he dismissed the doubt. Annaliza was pigheaded, bad-tempered, a fighting bitch who would be hard to conquer, but he could swear there was no greed in her. There was a quality of honesty about her that shone from those golden eyes of hers. "I don't want you hurt, Sin," Annaliza's voice went on, slightly slurred now, as if she found it an effort to bring out words. "Even now, if I could, I would let you go. But Richard has made up his mind, and there is nothing I can do. I hope you understand?"

"But there is something you can do," Sin mocked. "You can share in the spoils. That part should prove very pleasant to you."

Annaliza's face flushed scarlet, whether from genuine anger or from some other undefined emotion, Sin could not tell. "You have so much money, my Lord Sinclair," she cried, "that you wouldn't understand the needs of those less fortunate."

"The needs of others?" Sin said in a hard voice. "Are you trying to persuade me that you are some kind of a female Robin Hood, my dear? If so, it won't wash. Certainly you are ready to rob the rich to give to the poor, always provided that the poor is your so charming self. That is the rather sordid truth, is it not?"

"Shut up, both of you!" Manford commanded in a brusque voice. "I'm tired of all this chatter. We've got you, m'lord, and like I told you, no amount of talk will get you out of it.

As for the wench, I find her full of surprises." He grinned at Annaliza. "In my estimation you've gone up quite a few notches, my love. I really didn't think you had it in you. Shows what a good dose of healthy greed will do, doesn't it?"

Annaliza turned her shamed face away. "I'm . . . I'm not really greedy," she muttered.

"Of course you are," Manford said in what was for him a cheerful voice. "Don't be ashamed to admit it." He gestured to Higgins with his free hand. "All right, you. Get on with it."

Sin's stomach muscles tightened as Higgins came up behind him, but he did not lose his calm. Carefully watching the shadow cast on the stone wall, Sin drove his elbow savagely into the man's flabby stomach a split second before the pistol butt could descend. With Higgins' gasp sounding in his ears, he turned swiftly, felling the staggering man with a smashing blow to the jaw.

Momentarily startled, Manford watched as Sin grabbed for the fallen pistol; then, cursing, he leveled his own weapon and fired. "Higgins!" he shouted. "Get yourself on your damned feet!"

Sin sagged to his knees, his fingers clasping the place where the ball had entered. Through the darkness descending upon him, he heard Annaliza's raised, hysterical voice. "Oh, my God! You've killed him!"

Unmoved, Manford watched as Sin slumped forward on his face. "He's not dead," he said curtly. "The ball took him in the shoulder."

Controlling a desire to rush forward and see for herself, Annaliza said in a shaking voice, "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." Manford turned his eyes to Higgins, who had just scrambled to his feet and was looking dazedly in his direction. "Take the fancy lord through the tunnel to Selwyn's cottage. I don't want anyone spotting you."

Annaliza's eyes widened with horror. "Through the tunnel! Richard, you can't let him be pulled over those stones. He's bleeding too badly. He might die!"

"From a wound in the shoulder?" Manford said impatiently. "Don't be a fool!"

Annaliza looked with despairing eyes at Sin's crumpled form. "But he was wounded before. Two highwaymen attacked him on the journey to Cornwall. Richard, I'm afraid it will be too much for him. He should have a doctor."

Manford shrugged. "The only doctor he'll get is yourself, my love." He nodded to Higgins. "See to it."

Higgins seemed not to have heard him. He was swaying on his feet, his fingers tenderly exploring his jaw. "I shouldn't be surprised if the swine ain't broke my jaw," he mumbled. "It hurts enough."

"Do as I say," Manford snapped, "or you'll have a broken head to go with it. You can carry him or drag him, it's all one to me. Just get him out of here."

Annaliza gave a cry of protest as Higgins, grumbling beneath his breath, stooped to his task. "Richard, please! There will be no one to see if Higgins puts Sin across his horse and takes him the long way to Selwyn's cottage."

Manford's hard eyes dwelt thoughtfully on Annaliza's flushed face. "You are in quite a frenzy, my love," he said slowly. "I wonder why?"

With a sinking heart Annaliza realized that she had aroused his suspicions again. "Of course I am in a frenzy," she said boldly, "but the frenzy is for you and for myself. I don't want Lord Sinclair's death on my conscience, and I don't want to be hunted down as having a part in it. You can surely understand that?"

"Maybe I do, and then again, maybe I don't. I'll let you know when I reach a decision." He looked toward Higgins, who had now reached the other side of the cave and was engaged in removing the stone that concealed the entrance to the tunnel. "Roll it away, idiot!" he shouted. "Don't, for God's sake, try to lift it. Do I have to stand over you and tell you every little thing?"

Annaliza tried again. "I tell you, Richard, Sin will lose too much blood. He'll die!"

"Then you'll have to practice your nursing skills on him," Manford answered indifferently. "Go into the tunnel with Higgins. You can help him drag the body along." He laughed at her expression of horror. "Dear Annaliza," he said softly, "when you played your little game, you thought you were fooling me nicely, didn't you? But I wasn't deceived for one moment."

"I . . . I don't know what you mean."

"But of course you do. I went along with you because it amused me to do so. You are in love with Lord Sinclair. Don't trouble to deny it." Moving closer, Manford struck her a light but stinging blow on the cheek. "That is to tell you

that my amusement has just this moment vanished. I dislike to be played for a fool, my love. I dislike it very much!"

Her hand against her stinging cheek, Annaliza threw discretion to the winds. "Yes, I'm in love with him," she panted. "And I'll save him from you if I can!"

"Ah, now you're being honest. It is an improvement to that sickly act you put on. But you'll not save him, or help him to get away, my love. You'll go with Higgins, just as I ordered. I want Lord Sinclair kept alive for a time, and you'll help nurse him." Manford smiled. "In case you are wondering, you'll be well-guarded."

Annaliza's eyes were very wide in her blanched face. "After you have the ransom money, what happens to Sin?"

"Well, now, that depends on my mood, and to a large degree, on you."

"On me?"

Manford nodded. "My plans haven't changed. I intend to marry you, Annaliza. God knows you bore me, but you'll provide me with the respectable front I need."

"You pig! How could I ever have believed in you?"

"Because you're a fool?" Manford suggested.

"You're right," Annaliza said bitterly. "Only a fool could have been so easily gulled."

"Well, now that we have that established, behave yourself, and maybe I'll allow your Lord Sinclair to go free."

"No, Richard. Now that I've stopped being a fool, I can see things very clearly. You won't allow Sin to go free. You dare not. You know quite well that he would inform the authorities and you would be hunted down."

"I'd be over to France or someplace else before Sinclair could turn around. Perhaps America. I've always had a fancy for it."

Annaliza ignored him. "And what about me? If you kill Sin, do you honestly think I'll stand by and do nothing?"

"I do think so, my love. I know very well how to break a woman. By the time I'd finished with you, you would be too terrified to utter a word. Well, what shall it be, once we have the ransom, of course? I think America, don't you?"

Annaliza trembled with the force of her loathing. "If you think I'd go with you, you are insane!"

Manford's cold smile returned. "You won't have much choice in the matter. Still, if you prefer, there is another way. I can arrange it so that you will be accused of Lord Sinclair's murder. With sufficient money and bribery in the right quar-

ters, it could be done. In fact, I happen to know that it has been done. Many an innocent person has hanged for another's crime."

"I think I would prefer to be hanged if the alternative was marriage to you." Unable to bear the sight of his gloating, triumphant face, her heart filled with burning hatred, Annaliza turned and raced after Higgins.

14



The reverend's household was in an uproar. Lord Sinclair and the reverend's daughter were missing. Lord Sinclair, according to Melton's story, had gone for a walk the night before. He had not been seen since. It was discovered that Annaliza's bed had not been slept in. The gown she had worn the night before had been found pooled on the floor, as though she had taken off in a great hurry. Now, in the late evening of the following day, with no sign of the pair, it had become a cause for great concern.

Lady Araminta, prostrate on her bed with worry, greatly feared that Sin's passion had overcome him and that he had carried Annaliza off. Sin, she was forced to admit, had always been unconventional, living, it would seem, by his own laws. Questions raced through her mind. Was she being unfair to Sin? Had he indeed made off with the girl, and if so, having compromised her, would he offer her the protection of his name? Oh, dear, it was all so very distressing! How would she ever be able to look dear Giles in the face again? In her state of mind, she was certainly not in the mood for Liberty Hayes, who, having marched into the bedroom without the courtesy of knocking now proceeded to rally her. "Come, come, my lady," Liberty said in her most severe voice. "This will never do. You must get up and allow me to dress you. The reverend wishes to see you."

Lady Araminta cast a look of horror. "I cannot face him, Liberty," she cried, "I really cannot! When I think of the thoughts that must be passing through his mind, I shudder!"

"They are no doubt the same thoughts that are in yours, my lady," Liberty said dryly. "That being so, you must meet with him."

"I have told you that I cannot!"

"You can and you will. Now, then, my lady, you must gird your loins, as the saying goes. You must pull yourself together at once, for I've no patience with weakness."

Her tears flowing afresh, Lady Araminta reared up on the bed. "How dare you speak to me like that!" she cried out in a passionate voice. "It is not weakness, but sorrow. But there, what could you possibly know of a mother's anguish?"

Liberty sniffed. "I dislike to see you in this distraught condition, and I dare because I am fond of you. Dismiss me from your service if you choose, but I will always speak my mind."

"There are times when you try me very high, Liberty, but I cannot do without you, as you know very well." After she had delivered herself of these words, the fire went out of Lady Araminta's eyes. "I know not what construction to put upon the disappearance of my son and Annaliza." She flopped back against the pillow. "Oh, dear! Where can they be?"

"Would you like to know what I think, my lady?" Liberty asked, eyeing her grimly.

Lady Araminta swept her tumbled hair away from her flushed, tearstained face. "No," she answered. "But you will tell me anyway. But, Liberty, you don't really think that my son . . ." She broke off, her eyes pleading with the maid to comfort her.

Liberty rejected the plea. "There's no two ways about it, my lady. I think that Lord Sinclair has made off with the girl. He is a sinful man, and he has no shame, no conscience. It is my misfortune to love him, but I cannot blind myself to his faults."

"He is not as you say!" Lady Araminta cried indignantly. "I cannot allow you to say such things about Lord Sinclair!"

"You asked me, my lady. As for Miss Annaliza, she is a flighty young creature if ever I saw one. I have no doubt that she was dazzled by the charm that Lord Sinclair knows so well how to exert."

"Yes, he can be very charming," Lady Araminta said wistfully. "If they are indeed together, Liberty, I cannot think what to do."

"I will tell you, my lady. The moment you set eyes on the guilty pair, you must see to it that a marriage is arranged."

Lady Araminta flushed. "We must not judge so hastily. Is it not possible that they have taken two different directions?"

"It may be so, my lady, but I think it unlikely. If what we suspect is true, Lord Sinclair must marry her."

"You take too much upon yourself, Liberty!"

"Aye, possibly I do. It is difficult for me, you see. Having known his lordship since he was in short coats, and loving him despite all his sinful and lecherous ways, I do tend to forget that I am a mere servant. I will say nothing of the fact that I have oft cradled him in my arms, or that the greater part of my life has been spent in your ladyship's service, or even that I have rejected all thoughts of a life of my own, until that old fool Melton came along. I apologize to you, my lady, for forgetting my place. I humbly apologize."

"Oh, Liberty!" Lady Araminta wailed, overcome with guilt. "How you do go on!" She was silent for a moment; then she said in a tremulous voice, "If my son has indeed wronged the girl, it might be that he can be persuaded to marry her."

"It is to be hoped so, my lady. Were the unfortunate girl my daughter, I would go after his lordship with a shotgun."

It was too much! Now Liberty had overstepped the bounds. Rising from the bed, Lady Araminta said haughtily, "The girl is not your daughter; therefore you will refrain from further comment. I will not discuss my son with you further. Neither will I allow you or anyone else to condemn him without a hearing. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Very clear, my lady." Liberty smiled to herself. Having aroused her ladyship from the sodden state of guilt and self-pity into which she had fallen, she was well content. Lady Sinclair would now be convinced that she alone in this household held Lord Sinclair to be guiltless. Her indignation and her self-deception would give her the necessary strength to face the reverend. Lady Sinclair was a butterfly of a woman, but Liberty loved her dearly, just as she loved her scoundrel of a son. "Will you wear the blue gown, my lady?" Liberty asked almost tenderly. "Or shall it be the gray lace?"

So rarely was Liberty in a melting mood that Lady Araminta turned and regarded her with sharp suspicion. Deciding that the woman's fangs had been temporarily drawn, she reverted to her old dependent self. "You choose, Liberty," she said, accompanying the words with a faint smile. "I am sure you will appreciate that I am all to pieces at this moment."

"The blue, then, my lady," Liberty said briskly. "You always look well in blue. I will go to the kitchen now. Ellen will help me bring up the hot water for your bath. We must not keep the reverend waiting longer than necessary."

Lady Araminta sighed. "Whatever you say, Liberty."

Toiling up the stairs for the third time behind the gaunt figure of Liberty Hayes, Ellen grimaced to herself. Between them, she thought, they had carried up enough hot water to drown her ladyship. But there, that was Liberty Hayes for you. Reaching the top of the stairs, she set the heavy copper jugs down before the bedroom door. "Will that be all, Miss Hayes?" she said demurely.

Liberty nodded. "It will suffice." Her eyes dwelt on Ellen censoriously. "I am aware that you spend much of your time gossiping with Mrs. Lynch," she said in a severe voice. "That woman would do better to be at her stove than wagging her tongue. And as for you, I have noticed dust an inch thick on the furniture. However, in regard to this gossip, I must warn you that if I find it concerns your betters, I will be seriously displeased. You may go now. Kindly bear in mind what I have said."

Ellen glided swiftly down the stairs. Old witch! she thought resentfully. Who did she think she was, anyway? To listen to her, you would think she was Lady Sinclair, rather than a servant!

Returning to the kitchen, Ellen found that Mrs. Lynch was still fuming from her encounter with Liberty Hayes. "Is that sharp-tongued bitch satisfied now that she's steamed up my kitchen so that a body can hardly breathe?" she demanded truculently. "Poor Lady Sinclair," she rushed on without waiting for an answer. "I'm sorry for her, I truly am. Liberty Hayes indeed! The poor lady must think she's got a dragon maiding her."

"I expect she's used to her," Ellen said mildly. "She was with her before Lord Sinclair was born. Anyway, never mind about her. Go on with what you were saying."

Invited to enlarge on the theme she had begun to develop when Liberty Hayes had invaded the kitchen, Mrs. Lynch brightened perceptibly. "Now, then, where was I?"

"You were saying that there was something fishy about Lord Sinclair and Miss Annaliza being missing at the same time."

Mrs. Lynch nodded her head. "And so there is," she said with considerable relish. "Take my word for it, Ellen, them two have run off together."

"Do you really think so, Cook?"

"I do indeed."

A pink flush of excitement tinged Ellen's cheeks. "Imagine! Wouldn't I just like to be Miss Annaliza!"

"I don't want no dirty talk, Ellen," Mrs. Lynch said sharply.

"I ain't talking dirty, Cook," Ellen protested. "I'm talking romantic. That Lord Sinclair's so handsome that I get goose bumps just looking at him. Being married to him would be just like living in a fairy tale." Suddenly overcome with emotion, she sniffed loudly and groped in her apron pocket for her handkerchief. "The more I think on it, Cook, the more I feel you must be right." She mopped at her eyes and replaced the handkerchief. "I wish 'em happy, I'm sure."

"That so? Maybe I'd do the same, if I felt there was cause."

Ellen appeared not to have heard this significant remark. "I ain't never in my life seen anyone as handsome as Lord Sinclair," she said dreamily. "I mean, all that lovely black hair, and them eyes. My word! I dream about them eyes of his."

Mrs. Lynch, who indulged herself in the penny dreadfuls of Mrs. Fanny Beuleigh, a well known and slightly scandalous romantic novelist, winked knowingly at Ellen. "Handsome is as handsome does, girl," she said somewhat ambiguously. "You shouldn't never trust a dark man. In Mrs. Beuleigh's novels, the hero is tall and fair, but the villain is always dark."

Ellen, who had long ago tired of the continual quotes from Mrs. Beuleigh's novels, said defensively, "Well, if it comes to that, Lord Sinclair is tall enough."

"That's as may be," Mrs. Lynch answered, undaunted. "But I put my trust in Mrs. Beuleigh. Only a woman of the world could write them novels, and it's my opinion she knows what she's talking about. As for your precious Lord Sinclair, he's called Lord Sin, ain't he? You can be sure he didn't get called that for no reason."

Ellen sat down abruptly on a kitchen stool. "But if he's run off with Miss Annaliza, he must be meaning to marry her."

"Must he?" Mrs. Lynch gave her a pitying smile. "If you was to read more, you'd know what's what." Leaning forward, she tapped the girl on the knee with a pudgy finger. "I said that them two have run off together, but I never said nothing about marriage, did I? If you want it straight, Lord Sin'll more likely ravish Miss Annaliza."

"Stop it! You shouldn't say such things."

Mrs. Lynch smiled with satisfaction at Ellen's expression of

utter horror. "Mrs. Beuleigh had a plot like that once. The villain was dark, like them villains always are, though he wasn't handsome like Lord Sin. He had a sort of narrow face, foxy-featured, if you know what I mean. He had a twitch to his upper lip what he wasn't able to control when he looked at the heroine. Had a sinister way of laughing 'n' all, and dark evil eyes what glowed red with lust and give the heroine shivers. Them eyes of his made her think of the deepest pits of hell. Anyway, he lured the heroine to a deserted old house. She kept on pleading with him, and begging him to think of her virginity, but once he got her in that old house, he had his way with her."

Interested despite herself, Ellen said breathlessly, "You mean that he ravished her?"

"He did, the bloody scum! Ravished her over and over again. Kept her tied to an old iron bedstead in an upper bedroom. The heroine went into a decline when he kept on having his way with her, but he didn't care. After he'd ruined her so that she couldn't never look the hero in the eyes again, he tired of her. Left her tied up in that room what had bats coming in the window at nights and rats scuttling across the dusty boards, and she with his baby coming! If the hero hadn't tracked her down, the poor thing would have died."

"What happened then?"

"The hero gave her his protection. Told her that no matter how much the villain had soiled her, he loved her still and he would bring up her child like it was his own. The heroine fell into his arms sobbing with love and gratitude, quite overcome by his nobility she was, poor tragic little thing! But she knew, even as his lips touched hers in a pure kiss, that she would always hear the villain's sinister laughter sounding through her dreams. It was her punishment, you see, for having let herself get soiled. Touching, it was. I had tears in my eyes when I turned the last page."

"Well!" Ellen exclaimed indignantly. "I don't see how it was her fault. What did she have to be punished for?"

"Oh, there is ins and outs to the story what I ain't got time to tell you now," Mrs. Lynch said impatiently. "But the moral is, a good woman shouldn't let herself get soiled, no matter what. A great one for morals, is Fanny Beuleigh."

Ellen bethought herself of the dark and fascinating Lord Sinclair, and the thought went through her mind that she wouldn't mind a bit if he ravished her. Trying to control her wayward thoughts, she said firmly, "It won't happen like that

for Miss Annaliza." She laughed. "Miss Annaliza's got a terrible temper. She wouldn't stand for it if he ravished her and then tried to get out of marrying her."

"I hope Miss Annaliza would be proud and dignified in her suffering." Mrs. Lynch shot her a critical look. "I'll have you know, Ellen, that a good woman what's been wronged don't behave like a fishwife."

Ellen grinned. "Miss Annaliza would. She wouldn't stand for no hanky-panky. More than likely she'd bash him over the head with the nearest thing at hand."

Mrs. Lynch gave her the pitying smile again. "Innocent as a lamb, ain't you? A man like Lord Sinclair wouldn't take no notice of temper or tantrums. I'm here to tell you, Ellen, that he ain't the marrying kind. Nor it wouldn't matter none to him if Miss Annaliza was pregnant. He'd walk off and leave her with one of them debonair smiles on his lips. I shouldn't wonder if he went straight on from her to debauch the next damsel he clapped eyes on."

Ellen glared at the fat, self-satisfied woman. "I won't believe that of him. He ain't like that. You don't know everything, and neither does your precious Mrs. Beuleigh. For your information, I read a couple of her books, and I thought they were just plain silly. Life ain't like that."

"Oh, I see!" Mrs. Lynch bridled angrily. "And what, if I may take the liberty to ask, does a young snip the likes of you know about life?"

Ellen stared back at her defiantly. "Enough to know that Lord Sinclair wouldn't treat Miss Annaliza that way."

"Ho! Just because you're dazzled by his handsome face, don't mean he's any good. I've had three husbands, so I speak from experience, and not a one of 'em was dark."

"So they was fair," Ellen retorted. "What's that supposed to prove?"

"It proves that the other kind ain't no good. A dark man inherits a lot from Satan, let me tell you."

"I've never heard such rubbish!"

"You're quite right, Ellen," a frigid voice said from the doorway. "Mrs. Lynch is a foolish and ignorant woman, and the less you associate with her, the better off you will be. It is no wonder that the food is inedible, since, as it now appears, Mrs. Lynch always has her head in those nonsensical books. Books, I might add, that are a hissing and an abomination. If I had my way, they would be publicly burned, instead of being allowed to inflame the imagination and to arouse lewd

thoughts." Liberty Hayes advanced farther into the kitchen. "You should think shame of yourself, Mrs. Lynch, for filling this young girl's head with a lot of rubbishy ideas!"

"Is that so, Liberty Hayes?" Mrs. Lynch scowled at her. "You ain't welcome in my kitchen, beanpole, so just march yourself out of here."

Liberty turned her head and looked commandingly at Ellen. "You are to take wine to the reverend's study. See to it at once."

"Yes, Miss Hayes." With a speaking look at Mrs. Lynch, Ellen scuttled away.

Liberty turned back to Mrs. Lynch. "Never lay your poisonous tongue on his lordship again, or else I will make you very sorry."

"Everybody knows what he is," Mrs. Lynch answered spiritedly. "If anything's a hissing and an abomination, it's his bloody lordship. Lord Sin, I hear that's the name the prince give him, and it suits him. God only knows what he's up to with Miss Annaliza, the poor innocent little lamb."

"Bah! You wouldn't know innocence if it was staring you in the face. It is true that his lordship is a sinful man, but he is much misjudged." Liberty frowned. "It is not for such as you to besmirch his name."

"I ain't needing to. From what I hear, he's done that for himself."

Liberty's face flushed a dull red and her eyes gleamed dangerously. "Whatever his lordship's faults, there has never been a reflection cast on the name of Sinclair."

"That's what you say." Mrs. Lynch grinned triumphantly.

"That is what I say, and that is what I mean. Now, get on with your work, you slattern!"

"Don't you tell me what to do!" Mrs. Lynch surged to her feet, her enormous breasts heaving beneath the drab brown bodice. "I take my orders from the reverend and Miss Annaliza. That being so, I ain't having no nonsense from you, beanpole."

Liberty looked back at her in silence for a moment; then she said in a measured voice, "Mrs. Lynch, if you should once more address me by that distasteful name, I will either snatch you bald-headed or give you a slap round the jaw that will have you staggering for a week. You may take your choice."

Immediately intimidated by the memory of the frightful black eye that Liberty Hayes had given to Melton, a full-

grown man, Mrs. Lynch sank back in her chair. "I didn't mean nothing," she muttered sullenly. "It's just that you do irritate a body with your airs and graces and your slinging your orders around. As for his lordship, I daresay he's all right, for all that he's too handsome for his own good. He's got Ellen proper daft, he has."

Liberty graciously conceded this last point. "His lordship, I am forced to admit, does have a peculiar effect on most females. That, however, cannot be said to be his fault."

"And does he have a peculiar effect on you?" Mrs. Lynch could not resist the jibe.

Coldly offended, Liberty gave her a quelling look. "I would have you know, Mrs. Lynch, that I am a respectable God-fearing woman. I do not entertain bawdy thoughts toward any man. The expressions I have seen on the faces of his lordship's female companions are utterly repugnant to me."

"Fancy him, do they?"

"Mrs. Lynch!"

"What about Melton?" Mrs. Lynch said hastily. "Don't you have no bawdy thoughts about him?"

"Certainly not!" Liberty snapped. "Melton, as I have repeatedly told him, is a sinner, a brand to be plucked from the burning. It is my only interest in him."

"Ain't you even fond of him?"

Liberty considered this gravely. "I will admit to a certain softening when in the presence of the old fool, but that has not changed my views. Melton knows that I will not permit liberties with my person. I will not, in other words, be handled as a harlot."

Mrs. Lynch shook her head sadly. "Poor Melton," she murmured. "Poor starved soul!"

"That will be enough, Mrs. Lynch!"

Encountering the fire in the woman's eyes, Mrs. Lynch muttered an apology. "Sorry, I'm sure. I never meant no harm, Miss Hayes."

Liberty inclined her head. "Very well, I will overlook your impudence this time. But see that it does not happen again." With a last contemptuous look at the woman lounging in the big armchair, she stalked to the door. "If you will take my advice," was her parting shot, "you will eat less and work more. You are grossly fat, and most offensive to the eyes."

In the corridor, Liberty almost collided with Melton. She stopped short and looked at him keenly, the suspicion crossing her mind that he had been drinking. Melton's face

was flushed, his thinning hair disheveled, and he was breathing heavily. "I'm glad I caught you, Liberty, love," he panted. "I could do with someone to talk things over with, before I go to her ladyship, that is."

Liberty leaned closer to him, delicately trying to sniff his breath. "You have not been drinking, Melton, I trust?"

"Drinking?" Melton looked at her with wounded eyes. "Never again, my dove! Not a drop has passed my lips since you promised to wed me. Made you a solemn oath, didn't I?"

Liberty sniffed. "Promises are like pie crust, easily broken. Well, then, if you haven't been rummaging in the reverend's wine cellar, what is on your mind?"

"This." Melton thrust a white silk scarf at her. "I was walking along the sands, and I found it in one of them caves."

"Well, what about it?"

"It's a scarf."

Liberty clicked her tongue impatiently. "I can see that for myself. What about it?"

"It's his lordship's scarf."

Liberty started. "You found it in a cave, you say?"

"Yes. It's his lordship's favorite scarf. He always wears it, and I was sure you'd recognize it."

Liberty snatched the silk square from his hand. Shaking it out, she examined it. "Melton!" she exclaimed, some of her high color fading. "Did you notice this stain?"

Melton nodded. "I did," he said gloomily. "That's what has me so rattled. It looks to me like a bloodstain."

"And to me. Her ladyship must be informed of the discovery at once." Liberty's lips trembled, and she passed a hand across her eyes. "Melton, if something has happened to his lordship, it will break my lady's heart. To say nothing of my heart. I have held his lordship in my arms when he was first born, I have watched over him and fed him, nursed him through childhood illnesses. I have watched him go from trusting child to sinful man, and despite his sinning, I truly love him."

At this unfamiliar sign of feminine weakness in his militant betrothed, Melton felt a wave of protective tenderness. "Never you fret, my dove," he said softly, sliding an arm about her rigidly corseted waist. "Ten to one his lordship cut his finger, or something like that. And him being sort of impatient and careless, he likely wiped the blood away on his scarf."

"Old fool!" Frowning, Liberty thrust his arm away. "Don't think, because I am disturbed at this moment, that it gives you leave to handle me in a lecherous way." Drawing a handkerchief from her sleeve, Liberty wiped her eyes briskly and then blew her nose resoundingly. Replacing the handkerchief, she favored Melton with an impatient look. "I know you seek to comfort me, but I must tell you that his lordship would scarcely throw away an expensive scarf, and one, moreover, that is his favorite, simply because it had a little blood on it. His lordship may be many things, but irresponsible he is not. Something has happened to him, Melton. I feel it in my bones."

"No, no, Liberty," Melton protested. "He'll turn up right as rain. You'll see."

At that moment the door to the study opened and Ellen stepped into the hall. Seeing the two of them standing there, she nodded her head significantly and closed the door gently behind her. "I ain't never seen the reverend so upset," she confided in a low voice. "He seems like a changed man. He's going on something awful about Lord Sinclair to her ladyship. He says if anything's happened to his little girl, he's going to see to it that his lordship regrets it for the rest of his life. Said that he should have taken into account his lordship's reputation before exposing Miss Annaliza to him."

"You have big ears, Ellen." Liberty uttered the reproof absently.

"I couldn't help hearing," Ellen defended herself. "Seems like they didn't even notice I was in the room. I took in the wine, like you said, but I didn't wait to pour it. I just left 'em to it."

"I must go to her ladyship," Liberty said. "Melton, find Carrington. Tell him he is to take the carriage and scour the countryside. It might well be that his lordship is lying injured somewhere."

"Yes, my dearest, I'll go at once." Melton hurried away.

"Miss Hayes," Ellen said hesitantly. "What about Miss Annaliza? Do you think she's been injured too?"

Liberty's eyes went to the scarf in her hand. "I don't know, Ellen. I pray not."

Ellen nodded vigorously. "Me too. I'm real fond of Miss Annaliza." Her smooth brow wrinkled. "They must be together. Wouldn't you say that?"

"I think they are." Liberty's fingers tightened on the scarf.

"Yes, I'm almost certain they are together. Though in what condition, I shudder to think."

Ellen shivered. "You're scaring me," she protested. "Anyway, what makes you think his lordship's been injured?"

Coming to herself, Liberty gave the girl a cold look. "Never mind about that for now. It is useless to make conjectures." Seeing the very real distress in Ellen's round eyes, she added on a kinder note, "Don't worry about your Miss Annaliza, I'm sure she'll be all right. Lord Sinclair too. Now, out of my way. I must see her ladyship." Liberty thrust Ellen to one side. "Get along about your work. Remember what I told you about the dust."

"Wait, Miss Hayes," Ellen said hastily. "Before you go in there, I ought to tell you what else I heard the reverend say."

"What is it, girl?"

"The reverend says that he ain't going to wait no longer for Lord Sinclair and Miss Annaliza to turn up. He says he's going to the authorities to report them missing, which is what he should have done when he first heard their beds hadn't been slept in. Says he hopes it ain't too late to save his little girl from her own folly. Well, as you can imagine, that put her ladyship in a proper taking. Told the reverend he hadn't got no right to jump to conclusions, and that her son wouldn't dream of taking advantage of an innocent young girl, unless that young girl was willing. Real fired-up, she was. Went for the reverend like a wild animal defending her cub."

"That will be enough, Ellen." Thoroughly alarmed but determined not to show it, Liberty gestured imperiously with her hand. "I have no wish to listen to any more of this tongue-wagging. Be about your business, or I shall box your ears. Scat!"

"I'm going, Miss Hayes. I'll get a duster and go over the furniture."

"And high time, too." Liberty directed a threatening look at her. "You will not make dusting an excuse for listening at keyholes, you mind that, my girl."

Her face reddening, for she had had this last in mind, Ellen swallowed and then said meekly, "No, Miss Hayes. I wouldn't think of such a thing."

Liberty waited until Ellen had disappeared; then she tapped briskly on the study door. Receiving no answer, and fearing her knock had not been heard over the heated voices coming from within, she turned the handle and entered. Lady Araminta stood with her back to the door, her eyes on the

fire glowing in the grate, her plump blue-clad figure visibly trembling. "I would never have thought it of you, Giles!" she was saying in a high, indignant voice. "How dare you say such things of my son!"

"You yourself have told me that he has the reputation of being a libertine, Araminta." The reverend's normally gentle voice was harsh and accusing. "Do you now seek to deny it?"

"Wicked, jealous people have said that, but never I," Lady Araminta cried passionately. "They do not know Sin. He is a good boy!"

"Sin!" The reverend almost sneered the word. "He is well-named, that much is certain."

"Oh!" Lady Araminta's blue eyes flashed. "At last I am seeing the real you. I shall never forgive you, Giles, never!"

"And I shall never forgive you or your precious son, if harm has come to my daughter. Bear that in mind, Araminta!"

Striving for dignity, Lady Araminta drew herself to her full diminutive height. "For a man of the cloth, you have evil thoughts. Has it not occurred to you that your daughter and my son may not be together?"

The reverend ran a distracted finger around his tight white collar. "I would not have thought they were together, had I not known of your son's reputation."

Lady Araminta's lip curled in scorn. "You think Sin carried your daughter off kicking and screaming? No, Giles. If they are together, she went willingly."

"I only know this, Araminta," the reverend said in a difficult voice. "If your son lays disrespectful hands on my daughter, he shall answer to me."

Deeming that it was time she intervened, Liberty said in a portentous voice, "Judge not, lest ye be judged."

Lady Araminta swung round to face her. "That coming from you, Liberty, who have always misjudged my dear son!" she cried, her voice trembling on the edge of hysteria. "Oh, I do think that is the outside of enough!"

"Recriminations will not serve here, my lady," Liberty said sternly. "I have something to show you." She advanced, holding out the white scarf. "Melton found this."

Lady Araminta's hand trembled as she took the scarf from Liberty. "It is Sin's," she said in a tremulous voice. "Where did Melton find it?"

"In a cave, my lady."

"A cave?"

"On the sands below. Melton tells me there are many such caves. He happened to wander into one, and he found the scarf." Liberty's hand stole out and touched Lady Araminta's shoulder. "My lady, it may mean nothing, but there is blood on the scarf."

"Blood!" Her face draining of color, Lady Araminta swayed. "Liberty, what are you trying to say? What does it mean?"

"I am not trying to say anything, my lady. As to the meaning, I intend to find out." Liberty patted Lady Araminta's quivering shoulder reassuringly. "Courage, you must have courage."

"That is all very well for you to say," Lady Araminta cried wildly. "But he is my son!"

Liberty looked steadily into her eyes. "I love him too, my lady," she said quietly.

Lady Araminta looked back at her with a suddenly stricken expression. "I am so sorry, Liberty! Of course you do. It is just so hard to think of you as loving anybody."

Liberty felt pain, as though she had been dealt a hard blow. "That may be, my lady, but I assure you I have normal feelings." Seeing that Lady Araminta was about to speak, she hurried on. "At this very moment Carrington is out searching for further signs of his lordship. We will have this little mystery cleared up in no time, or my name is not Liberty Hayes."

His strength deserting him, the reverend sank down in a chair. "And Annaliza? What of her?"

Her eyes softening, Liberty turned to look at him. His thin blue-veined hands were gripped tightly together, and there were lines of strain evident in his melancholy face. "You must try not to worry, sir," she said gently. "I feel certain that there is a logical explanation for this prolonged absence. You may be sure, if they are together, that they will turn up very soon." Having uttered the comforting lie, for she was by no means sure of herself, Liberty called on her old briskness of manner to cover what she considered to be an undue excess of emotion. Turning to Lady Araminta, she said in a domineering voice, "Now, then, my lady, there must be no further recriminations between you and the reverend. I ask you to remember that you share the same anxiety and that the reverend is just as much in need of comfort as yourself. Until we know what has happened, you must give each other strength and support."

Lady Araminta stared at Liberty indignantly; then, her indignation fading, her blue eyes filled with tears. "You are right, Liberty," she cried. "You are always right!" Her skirts rustling and swaying, Lady Araminta ran to the reverend and sank down beside his chair. "Dear Giles, pray do forgive me! I am so distracted that I did not know what I was saying." She touched his black-clad arm. "I know how worried you must be over Annaliza."

Sighing, the reverend stroked Lady Araminta's soft hair. "I am indeed. And I am sorry for the harsh things I said. I ask your pardon."

"Dearest Giles, you must not apologize to me. I am the greatest beast in nature!"

"Hush, Araminta, hush!"

Her hands folded before her, Liberty looked on at the tender scene with grim approval. The thought crossed her mind that the reverend would make a very suitable husband for her lady. The reverend was gentle and unworldly; Lady Araminta was worldly but likewise gentle. In her opinion, they would deal very well together. Once this disturbing matter of Lord Sinclair and Miss Annaliza was cleared up, she would insinuate the idea into their minds. Lady Sinclair, for all her gay society life, was often lonely, and apparently she was more than a little fond of her old childhood friend. The same might be said of the reverend. Her eyes thoughtful, Liberty turned to the present pressing problem. It was highly possible that Lord Sinclair and the girl were together, but perhaps for other reasons than fornication. It was certainly true that Lord Sinclair would have bedded the girl, had she been willing, but Miss Annaliza was not the type he admired. Liberty frowned, her thin lips setting in a hard line. Lord Sinclair admired the more exotic type of female, and Miss Annaliza, except for her remarkable eyes, could not be said to be other than plain. Therefore, she would not appeal to him except as a temporary distraction. Liberty thought fleetingly of Melton. There was a great deal of Lord Sinclair in that miserable sinner, which was a fault in his character she intended to erase. If, after they were wed, Melton thought to lie with other females, he would find that he had made a grave and physically painful mistake. Coming back to herself, Liberty said sharply, "I will leave you now. I wish to see if Carrington has returned."

"Wait, Liberty," the reverend said. "If it turns out that

Carrington has no news, then I think we must call in the authorities. Don't you agree?"

Liberty nodded. "It might be best, sir. Normally I would advise waiting, for his lordship has often gone away without leaving word, a habit of his of which I cannot approve. However, with your daughter involved, perhaps we should not wait."

Lady Araminta rose to her feet. "Liberty," she said eagerly, "I have just had a thought. Perhaps, after all, the blood on the scarf is not so very sinister. It might be that the wound my son received on the road had begun to bleed again and that he used the scarf to stanch it."

"Perhaps," Liberty said dryly. "But I doubt he would have thrown the scarf away."

"Oh, Liberty!" Lady Araminta drooped again. "Now you have taken away my hope."

"I did not mean to, my lady, I just . . ." Liberty broke off as a knock sounded on the door. "Come in," she called.

Ellen entered the room hesitantly, an envelope clutched in her hand. "A boy came to the door," she explained, looking at Lady Araminta. She held out the envelope. "He said he'd been told to deliver this to Lady Sinclair."

"But who would be writing to me?" Lady Araminta said, taking the envelope from Ellen. "I know no one here."

"The boy just shoved the envelope at me," Ellen said apologetically. "Said a gentleman had given it to him to deliver, and then he ran off."

"Araminta," the reverend said hopefully, "could it possibly be from your son?"

Lady Araminta studied the plain envelope. "I will see."

Becoming aware that Ellen was lingering, Liberty said menacingly, "Get along about your work, girl."

The door closed behind Ellen. Turning back to Lady Araminta, Liberty was shocked at the sight of her face. Except for the rouge, which stood out in glaring patches, all the color had drained from her employer's face. "My lady!" Liberty cried. "What has happened? Have you had bad news of Lord Sinclair?"

"Oh, my God!" The single sheet of paper trembled in Lady Araminta's hand. "This is a ransom note! This person, whoever he is, has Sin. He will not release him unless I pay him the sum he demands. He gives me a week to get the money together. Liberty, you must help me! What can I do? I do not have such a large amount of money with me."

"There is only one thing we can do, my lady. We must go at once to the authorities."

"I cannot, Liberty." Lady Araminta shook her head vehemently. "The note warns me that my son will be killed if I bring in the authorities."

"But, my lady, it is the thing to do."

"No, Liberty, I will not do that. I will not risk my son's life!"

The reverend, who had thus far remained silent, touched Lady Araminta's arm. "Does the note say anything about Annaliza?"

Lady Araminta, who appeared to have forgotten he was there, started. Her face distorting with fury, she whirled round to face him. "Yes," she cried passionately, "it mentions that . . . that viper! She is involved in this plot against my son. Sin has apparently been wounded again, though not, so the note states, seriously, and Annaliza has been set to guard him. Indeed, she volunteered to do it!"

"No!" the reverend whispered. "No, Araminta, it cannot be!"

"Can it not?" Lady Araminta thrust the paper into the reverend's hand. "Read it for yourself. Go on, read what it says about that wicked, wicked girl!"

"I will never believe that of Miss Annaliza," Liberty said surprisingly. "The girl is sadly flighty, but it is not in her to do a thing like that, and especially not to his lordship."

The reverend looked up from the note, a pathetic gratitude in his eyes. "Thank you, Liberty. So I think."

Lady Araminta was not to be appeased. "Nonsense! Annaliza's part in this has been set down in black and white. What do you think of your wonderful daughter now, Giles?"

"As I have always thought, Araminta. Annaliza is a good girl."

Before Lady Araminta could answer, Liberty intervened. "I think it possible that the girl has been coerced, my lady. I have seen Miss Annaliza looking at his lordship when she believed herself to be unobserved, and it was not enmity or hatred I saw in her expression."

"No, of course not," the reverend said with trembling eagerness. "It was friendship you saw, was it not, Liberty?"

"With all due respect to a father's feelings," Liberty said primly, "it was a little more than that."

Lady Araminta's hands clenched. "Why are we standing here talking nonsense? Liberty, you must help me pack. I

must go at once to London. If I am to withdraw such a large sum of money, I must see my banker personally."

"I will come with you, Araminta," the reverend put in.
"You will need an escort on the road."

"I do not need you, Giles."

"Do you hate me too, Araminta?" the reverend asked sadly.

Lady Araminta turned to look at him. "No, Giles, I don't hate you. Your daughter's sins are no fault of yours. I shall have Melton to protect me; therefore there is no need for you to accompany me. Besides, it is better you stay here. There may be further news."

Liberty's prominent chin set determinedly. "I think you must allow the reverend to go with you, my lady," she said in a flat, uncompromising voice. "I will not be by your side, and neither will Melton."

"What!" Lady Araminta stared at her in outrage. "You seem to forget that I employ you, Liberty."

"I do not forget, my lady."

"Then you will accompany me. Melton also."

A militant gleam lit Liberty's eyes. "I will not, my lady. Melton is employed by Lord Sinclair, and it is his duty to stay. As for me, I will do likewise. If you wish to dismiss me from your service, then, my lady, you must do so."

"Liberty! Why are you defying me?"

"Because, my lady, I intend to conduct a search for my boy. Woe betide the scoundrel who is holding him captive! I will make him sorry for the day he was born."

Her boy! Lady Araminta gaped at her. Liberty must indeed be greatly disturbed if she could employ such a term of endearment to one whom she habitually referred to as "wicked and sinful." Moved by these signs of loyalty and love, she said in a shaken voice, "You can do nothing, Liberty."

"If you think that, my lady, you do not know me. If Lord Sinclair is held captive in these parts, I will find him. As for yourself, you do not need me. You will get on very well without me."

"Let me take Melton, then," Lady Araminta said, descending to pleading. "Liberty, be reasonable. I do not intend to stop on the roads, for I shall sleep in the carriage. But Carrington cannot drive on and on without rest. Melton must be there to take his turn at the reins. You do see that?"

Liberty looked at her grimly. "Your ladyship knows very

well that your word is law, not mine. I only ask you to remember that I shall need Melton to aid me in my search."

Lady Araminta put a hand to her suddenly throbbing head. "My word is law, you say," she said bitterly. "Really, Liberty, there are times when I wonder!"

Liberty gave her a blank stare. "I do not understand your meaning, my lady. I am but a humble servant."

Lady Araminta drew herself up. "Let us stop this fencing, Liberty. It would seem to me that your will has always overborne mine. As for being humble, I do not doubt that you were issuing orders from your cradle."

"Your ladyship is dissatisfied?"

"Oh, Liberty!"

"Araminta, there is Nugent, my gardener," the reverend intervened tactfully. "Nugent was a coachman before he came to me. Let him come with us. He has been complaining for a long time that he is homesick for a glimpse of London."

Lady Araminta turned to look at him. "Thank you, Giles. Your offer has relieved my mind about Carrington. But in regard to yourself, I still think you should stay here."

Liberty had taken a strong liking to the reverend, but she had no intention of letting his presence upset the plans that were rapidly forming in her mind. He was a kind man, a gentle man, but if they should find Lord Sinclair and it should come to action, he would be quite ineffectual, proving to be a hindrance rather than a help. Another thing, he needed to be relieved of his anxiety concerning his daughter, and if he traveled with her ladyship, it would be a diversion for the poor man. He would be so concerned with aiding her mistress that his mind would not be dwelling unduly on Miss Annaliza. Liberty moved a step nearer to Lady Araminta. Bending her head, she lowered her voice to a whisper. "I am worried about the reverend, my lady. I think it possible that, left to himself, his anxiety for his daughter will reach such proportions that he will go straight to the authorities. I am sure I do not need to tell your ladyship that the reverend is a very law-abiding man."

Lady Araminta took instant alarm. "Liberty!" Her answering whisper thrilled with horror. "We cannot allow him to do that. If the kidnapper comes to hear of it, he will kill Sin!"

Liberty sighed. "I fear so, my lady. But since I would be exceeding my place if I attempted to stop the reverend, I cannot think what is to be done."

"In that case, Liberty, your thinking is at fault. The solution is apparent to me. Giles must accompany me."

"Your ladyship is always so wise."

Suspecting sarcasm, Lady Araminta bridled. "I do have some thoughts of my own, you know." Raising her voice, she addressed the reverend. "Giles, I have changed my mind. I feel that I would be more comfortable, were you to travel with me." She gave him a strained smile. "Are you still wishful to come?"

"But of course, Araminta," the reverend replied quickly. "I shall be glad to get this sad business over with. My daughter is innocent of complicity, as you will find out when our children are returned to us."

Lady Araminta answered this with a delicate sniff. "We shall see."

The reverend's pale face flushed pink, and his mild eyes lit with an indignant gleam. "We will indeed, Araminta."

Disdaining to make further comment on a girl whom she now considered to be quite beyond the pale, Lady Araminta tossed her head haughtily. "May I rely upon you, Giles?" she asked in a cold voice.

"You may."

Having quite forgotten that it had been Liberty's idea in the first place, Lady Araminta directed a sparkling triumphant glance at her maid. "Thank you, Giles," she said demurely.

The reverend walked over to the door and opened it. "I will go and put a few things together," he said somewhat stiffly. "After that, I shall be entirely at your disposal."

"You will not need much," Lady Araminta said hastily. "Remember, we shall not be stopping on the way, save when necessity dictates, and we shall be in London only for the length of time it takes me to consult with my banker."

"I am aware of that, Araminta. You need not refine upon it." His head held high, the reverend went out, closing the door sharply behind him.

Lady Araminta sighed. "I wish I did not need to have him along, Liberty," she said despondently. "I am sure he will spend the entire journey singing the praises of his wretched daughter."

"But that is only natural, my lady," Liberty said, her harsh voice assuming a soothing note. "Few are the parents who can see fault in their children." This last was delivered with such a meaningful look that Lady Araminta's eyes sparked

with anger. "Anyway," Liberty went on, "I feel sure you will be glad of the reverend's company on the journey."

"I most certainly will not be, not if he is going to prate on and on about that wicked girl!"

Liberty hid her impatience. "Your ladyship must reserve judgment on Miss Annaliza," she said austere. "Speaking for myself, I do not believe she is involved."

"How can you say that! The kidnapper made the statement that she had elected to guard Sin."

"There are more reasons than one for such a move, my lady."

Lady Araminta looked wistful. "I hope you are right about Annaliza, I do indeed, for I quite liked the girl. But the thing is, Liberty, I fail to see how you can be in this instance. After all, even you can be wrong."

"That is very true, my lady," Liberty conceded handsomely. "Nevertheless, I think not."

"Why must you always be so adamant, Liberty? I must confess that there are times when it quite irritates me."

"I am sorry," Liberty said, not sounding sorry at all. "But whatever way it turns out, it is hardly fair to blame the reverend for his daughter's behavior."

"Indeed! It would seem to me that a parent may be blamed for condoning certain unworthy traits in a child's character."

"They may indeed, my lady. And there are some parents who should consider themselves to be sunk beyond reproach."

"Liberty! You go too far!" Lady Araminta's voice fairly quivered with rage. "How dare you say that to me!"

"But, my lady, I have said nothing."

"Do not think to deceive me. I am not yet in my dotage! Wretched woman! How can you bring yourself to cut at me, when I am so beset with worry?"

"Your ladyship mistakes," Liberty said smoothly. "Come now, I will help you dress."

Swallowing her anger, Lady Araminta told herself that it was not the slightest use to be angry with Liberty, who had armor plating for skin. As she allowed herself to be led from the room, her mind flew to a new alarm. "It is such a long journey, Liberty," she said in a faint voice. "I know I have been given a week to raise the money, but what if I cannot make it there and back in time?" she looked at Liberty with haunted eyes. "I am so afraid for Sin. If he is wounded, how can he defend himself against those fiends?"

"His lordship will find a way," Liberty said rallying. "As

for the journey, you will be there and back, and with time to spare. Have no fear, my lady. When the devil drives, one can do anything."

A wave of affection replacing her former anger, Lady Araminta said in a warm voice, "Dear Liberty, you are so wise and helpful, such a very great comfort to me."

"I do my best, my lady."

About to ascend the stairs, Lady Araminta paused. "If Carrington is still out, he must be found at once."

"I will see to it, my lady. You may safely leave everything to me."

"I know," Lady Araminta said softly. "I am sure I do not know what I would do without you."

"Or I," Liberty answered promptly. "There is no one who understands your ladyship as I do."

"How true." Like the butterfly to which Liberty had likened her, Lady Araminta fluttered up the stairs, trailing a cloud of perfume.



Annaliza closed the back door of the cottage softly behind her, hoping that the small unavoidable clicking sound it made would not awaken Sin from the restless sleep into which he had fallen. She listened intently for a moment for sounds from within. Hearing nothing, she picked up the two heavy iron-bound pails that stood by the door and trudged wearily along the uneven path that led to the well at the end of the overgrown garden. From the cottage behind her, she was painfully aware of Selwyn, a silent, menacing sentinel, watching her from the window. As if he needed to watch her, she thought bitterly, when Sin, now so sick and so helpless, needed her desperately. It was Sin who held her chained to the cottage, or she would long since have attempted to run. Richard Manford knew that she would never abandon Sin to the doubtful mercies of Selwyn, or any of the other men set to guard them, even if Selwyn did not.

Reaching the well, Annaliza set the pails down. She must rest for a moment, she thought dazedly, placing her hands on the sun-warmed bricks that edged the well. Three days and three nights they had been confined in Selwyn's cottage, and in that time she could not remember when she had last closed her eyes. Each time she would catch herself sliding into sleep, she would rise from her chair and rinse her face in cold water. Afterward, as a relief from the stifling atmosphere of the cottage, she would go outside and gulp down a few breaths of fresh air. Manford watched these maneuvers of hers with cynical amusement. "You may as well sleep, Annaliza," he had commented once. "Driving yourself on will not stop me from what I have to do."

Annaliza had ignored him. Sin was desperately ill, he needed her, and in any case, she was afraid to sleep, for fear

that Manford would carry out his threat to kill Sin. The frightening thought came to her that Manford would enjoy killing Sin while she looked on, but for all that, she could not help nursing the pathetic hope that her constant vigilance might deter him.

Annaliza looked down dully as a large brown dog came frisking toward her. "Hello, Fred," she said, stooping to pat him.

Fred gave a short bark of acknowledgment and settled himself comfortably at Annaliza's feet. Poor Fred! He growled whenever Selwyn, his master, came near, and this had earned him many a brutal beating. Selwyn! Annaliza felt such a violent surge of hatred at the thought of him that she trembled with the force of it. Selwyn seemed to her to be more animal than man. It was he who had removed the pistol ball from Sin's shoulder. Holding a pair of rusty pliers in his filthy hands, he had probed deeply into the wound. It was this callous, uncaring treatment that had resulted in the raging fever attacking Sin now.

Annaliza shuddered, remembering her incredulous horror when Selwyn, holding the pliers, had approached the unconscious man. "Stop!" she had shouted. She had started forward, intending to snatch the rusty instrument from Selwyn, but he had held it tauntingly aloft. "You can't use that thing on him, I won't let you!" Unmoved, Selwyn had surveyed her grimly. "Richard!" She had whirled to face Manford. "You must stop him!"

Manford turned indifferent eyes to her. "Be quiet!" he said coldly. "Bob knows what he is doing."

Frantic to convince him, Annaliza persisted. "But those pliers, the condition of his hands! Richard, don't you understand? He will kill Sin!"

Manford shrugged. "I warn you, Annaliza, your voice is beginning to annoy me."

Looking down at Sin, Annaliza felt a wave of terror. What would happen to him if Selwyn used that filthy instrument on him? "Richard," she said brokenly, "please don't let Selwyn do this to him!"

Manford had not answered. Grinning at her, his eyes malicious, Selwyn had brandished the pliers. "This is a good little tool," he said, "don't you make no mistake about that. Got nice thin points, it has. Just the thing for doing the job. And since his lordship has passed out, he ain't going to be feeling a thing."

"It's rusty," Annaliza said sharply, "and your hands are dirty."

"Go on with you! What's a little dirt among friends? His perishing lordship ain't going to die from a little dirt."

"You ignorant fool! I tell you that you'll kill him."

Selwyn's grin faded. "Not likely," he said roughly. "Now, stand back and let me get on with the job."

"No!" Annaliza caught at his arm. "You can't!"

Selwyn swore savagely as her nails ripped his skin. "If you want this job done, Manford, you'd better grab hold of the wench."

"I'll do better than that." Manford beckoned to two of his men, who were hovering in the doorway. "Blake, Edwards, get in here and hold her."

Annaliza had struggled frantically with the two men, but her efforts to fight free had only left her exhausted. At length she had been reduced to pleading. "Richard, I beg you! At least get Selwyn to clean the pliers and wash his hands."

Dislike glittering in his eyes, Manford looked at her steadily. "Edwards, if she utters one more word, you are to stuff your handkerchief in her mouth." He turned away.

"Good for you, Manford," Selwyn growled. "Women should be kept in their bloody place. This ain't the first ball I've taken out of a man," he went on, his voice turning aggrieved, "nor it won't be the last."

"And what happened to those men you treated?" Annaliza's voice was charged with hatred. "Did they die from your tender ministrations?"

Without turning, Manford said in a level voice, "Do as I told you, Edwards. Gag her."

With Edwards' soiled, much-used handkerchief stuffed in her mouth, her arms held in a numbing grip, Annaliza had been rendered totally helpless. Her heart thumping in great thick strokes, she had looked on with sickened eyes as Selwyn probed clumsily for the ball. The pain reaching him, Sin had regained consciousness. Moaning, his eyes wild, he had struck out with his sound arm at Selwyn, the source of his torment. "Manford!" Selwyn had shouted urgently. "Give the bastard a clip on the jaw. The wound's bleeding a fair bit, and my hands are slippery. I don't want to drop the pliers. The young lady might object if I get more dirt on 'em," he added with withering sarcasm.

Selwyn relaxed as Manford's hard fist felled the struggling man. "You nigh broke his jaw, Manford," he said in an ad-

miring voice. "That's what I call a sweet punch. I couldn't have done better myself."

"Thanks," Manford said shortly. "I've always known how to use my fists. You'd best remember that."

Selwyn ignored the veiled threat. At the strangled sound that came from Annaliza, Selwyn turned his head and winked at her. "What's the matter with you, girl? Ain't you got no gratitude? Manford done the swell a favor. He give him the benefit of his good right hook, you might say. He's sleeping real deep now." Encountering the blazing hatred in her eyes, he chuckled and turned back to the job.

After what seemed to Annaliza to be an interminable time, the operation was finally over. Looking pleased with himself, Selwyn crossed the room and flung the bloodied pliers into the sink. Casting a sly look at the white-faced Annaliza, he said in a taunting voice, "You see now, don't you, girl, that you made all that fuss for nothing? I done a nice job, even if I do say so myself."

Manford nodded to the two men holding Annaliza. "You can let her go now. Selwyn, I'll be back later. Make sure you keep an eye on the girl. Try to keep Sinclair ailve until we've collected the ransom money."

"You think it'll be paid?" Selwyn asked doubtfully. "It always seems to me that swells are a bit tightfisted with their money."

"Seeing that you've never had any connections with swells, you can't really know that." Manford looked at Annaliza, who had spat the gag from her mouth and was vigorously rubbing her numbed arms. "My little bride-to-be informs me that Lord Sinclair is a very important man, so I think you can be sure that the ransom will be paid."

"Go to hell!" Annaliza retorted. "I'll never marry you."

Ignoring Manford's look of fury, Selwyn laughed uproariously. "Fierce little thing, ain't she?" Meeting Manford's cold blue eyes, he sobered. "How you going to get a message to the swell's family?" he muttered.

"I've found out that Lord Sinclair's mother is also staying with the reverend," Manford answered. "I'll find someone to take the ransom note to her."

Selwyn's pale gray eyes gleamed. "You think she'll have the money with her?"

"Hardly," Manford said dryly. "The amount I shall demand is not usually carried as spare cash."

"How much you asking?" Selwyn said eagerly.

"Sufficient. Don't worry, you'll get your share."

The look Selwyn directed at him was laden with suspicion.
"I got to trust you, I suppose. Where's the money to be left?"

"You ask too many questions, Selwyn. Just leave everything to me."

Selwyn glowered at him. "Well, how's this Lady Sinclair to know where to leave the money?" he persisted.

Manford drew in an impatient breath. "I will give her a week to raise the money. When that time is up, I will have another note delivered to her. It will contain full instructions. Are you satisfied?"

"Got to be, ain't I?"

"That's right." Manford strode to the door, followed by Edwards and Blake. "Remember what I said, Selwyn. Try to keep Sinclair alive. We might need to give his mother some kind of reassurance."

"He ain't going to die, Manford. I done a good job."

"For your sake, I hope so."

After Manford left, it was some time before Annaliza could bring herself to approach the bed. It was Selwyn who roused her. "Well, girl," he sneered, "what are you sitting there for? Ain't you just dying to take a peek at your young lordling? After the way you fought me for them pliers, I expected you to be all over him."

Annaliza turned her head and looked at him. "You're a pig, Selwyn!" She spat the words at him. "A filthy pig! If your bungling costs Lord Sinclair his life, I swear to God that I'll find some way to kill you!"

Momentarily shaken by the look in her eyes, Selwyn flushed a dull red. "Don't you be giving me none of your threats!" he shouted. "I have to take it from Manford, but I ain't taking it from you. Much more of your bloody impudence, and I'll give you a smash in the mouth!"

Ignoring him, Annaliza rose to her feet and moved over to the bed. Sin lay on his back, his eyes closed. The clear, healthy brown of his complexion had faded to a grayish hue, his lips were tightly compressed, and his dark hair was flattened and matted with sweat. But for all these outward signs of suffering, she noted with relief, his breathing appeared to be even. Her eyes went to the crude bloodstained wrapping about his injured shoulder. "The wound is still bleeding," she told Selwyn in a toneless voice, "and this thing you've put on his shoulder is as dirty as your hands."

"You're really asking for it, girl!" Selwyn retorted angrily.

"Ain't I warned you about that smart talk? That thing, as you call it, is one of my best shirts. Tore it up, I did, for the sake of that bloody swell."

Hiding the fear that this brutal man with his hard gray eyes and his thin, cruel mouth inspired, Annaliza said in a firm voice, "It won't do. Haven't you got anything that is remotely clean?"

Rage swelled inside Selwyn. His hands balling into fists, he took an impulsive step forward. Then, remembering Manford, he stopped abruptly. It wouldn't do for him to rough up Manford's lady friend, not in ways that Manford could see, anyway. But he'd make sure that the bitch paid for her insults, and kept silent about it, too. "If my bandaging don't suit you," he said sullenly, "then you'd best do something about it yourself. I done my bit, and I ain't touching him no more. If he dies, the fault'll be yours, not mine. I ain't playing at nursemaid to no perishing swell." Walking over to the door, he opened it wide, letting in a gust of chill, rain-laden wind. "I'll be just outside," he warned, "so don't try anything."

The door banged shut behind him. Annaliza was still for a moment; then she jumped to her feet and set to work. After she had heated water in a pan over the open fire, she managed to locate a limp but clean sheet in a chest of drawers. Tears of reaction and strain ran down her cheeks as she began tearing the sheet into wide strips. Removing the grubby wrapping, she winced at the sight of the ugly, gaping wound. Bathing it with infinite care, she dried the area gently and then rebanded it with the clean linen. "There," she said, smoothing back Sin's damp hair with a shaking hand. "I hope that will feel better."

Sin's eyes opened slowly, making her jump. "It hurts like the very devil," he said in a slow but clear voice, "but it does feel better, thank you."

"Oh, Jonathan!" Annaliza's tears flowed faster. "What are we to do? We're only two miles from my home, but for all the good it does us, it might just as well be a thousand."

Sin's pale lips smiled faintly. "Do I . . . do I look as big a mess as you?" he inquired. "Your appearance is . . . is really reprehensible, to say the least."

"Don't! This is no time to be joking."

Wincing, Sin moved his position slightly. "But I am not joking." His voice sounded more labored now, as though the effort of talking had left him exhausted. "You are a dirty-

faced ragamuffin, if ever I saw one." His hand stole out to touch hers. "Don't cry, little one," he added gently. "I'll think of . . . of some way to get us out of this mess."

"I'm not crying," Annaliza said unreasonably.

"Yes, you are, and . . . it's making your nose infernally red."

Breaking down completely, Annaliza sank to her knees and buried her face against the rough blanket that covered the lumpy mattress. "This is my fault," she sobbed. "If it hadn't been for me, none of this would have happened."

"No, no." Sin touched her tumbled hair in a light caress. "You are too hard on yourself."

"I'm not! Oh, Sin, why did you have to follow me? Why did you interfere?"

"My dear girl," Sin said in a labored attempt at humor. "I wish you would make up your mind whether it is your fault or mine."

Annaliza raised her head. "This is no game, Sin! Don't you understand? As soon as Richard has the ransom money, he means to kill you."

Sin's clouded eyes sharpened. "Has he said so?"

"No, but the implication is clear. I'm afraid, Sin!"

"Don't be. I'm not at my best at this moment, but I'll think of a way to thwart Manford's ambitions. I'm very resourceful when it comes to saving my own life, and, incidentally, yours. For some reason, irritating brat though you are, your survival is important to me, if . . . if only so that I may administer the sound thrashing that you so richly deserve."

Her survival was important to him! Ignoring the mitigating words that had followed, Annaliza felt a rush of happiness. Then, as she caught sight of his face, her happiness gave way to a bleak misery. "Don't talk any more, Sin," she begged. "You are weaker than you think."

"I . . . I do feel rather odd," Sin admitted. "But it w-will pass."

"Close your eyes. Rest."

"For a little while, then. But don't let me sleep, Annaliza. Promise!"

She had no intention of awakening him, for he needed to gather strength, but to soothe him, she had promised. An hour passed, and she knew then that even had she desired to, she could not have awakened him, for Sin had begun to wander in delirium. In her despair, she had even consulted with

Selwyn, but he had only shrugged and said indifferently, "He'll come out of it. It takes 'em like that sometimes."

"After you've finished with them, you mean," Annaliza accused him bitterly. "Damn your soul to hell! You've as good as murdered Sin!"

Selwyn's reply to this was a hard blow to her ribs. He grinned at her as she lay on the floor gasping for breath. "There's plenty more of them to come, girl, if you don't watch your tongue. Another thing, you say one word to Manford, and I'll smother your bloody lord. That'll put him out of his misery, eh?"

After Selwyn had flung out of the tiny room, Annaliza had climbed painfully to her feet. It was then that her vigil had begun. Refusing to close her eyes, she kept herself awake by sheer willpower and the constant applications of icy water. She bathed Sin's burning body, fed him, exerted all her strength to hold him upright when he choked, but the personal things necessary to Sin's comfort were done by the current man on guard. Manford's orders, she was told. Glad that Sin's dignity was to be preserved from feminine eyes, though she doubted if that was Manford's object, she would go outside willingly. But once outside, she would be filled with suspicion that some harm might come to Sin while she was absent. Tense, trembling, she would stand with her ear pressed to the door, ready to rush in if the need arose.

One day turned into two, two into three, and still she remained awake. Slowly, inexorably, the week Manford had given to Lady Sinclair was passing. Fearful, driven, forgetting Selwyn's warning, Annaliza allowed her voice to grow shrill, her tongue ever more reckless. Selwyn retaliated with blows that were not designed to be visible to Manford's eyes. Aimed cunningly low, they did not incapacitate her but they did give the maximum of pain. Strangely, Annaliza welcomed the pain, for it helped to keep her awake. Ignoring the guard of the moment as best she could, she would sit beside Sin, talking to him ceaselessly, hoping to penetrate the fever and elicit some kind of response.

Annaliza's wandering thoughts broke off. Her lips turning up in a mirthless smile, she looked down at the brown dog curled at her feet. "I am so tired I could die!" she said softly. "Three days and three nights is surely a small space of time to make so much difference." Her hands clenched, and her shadowed eyes lit with a new determination. "Three days or

three weeks, I will keep awake! If Richard intends to kill Sin, he will have to kill me first!"

Her last words were uttered with such shaken passion that the dog, disturbed from his light slumber, opened bleary eyes and uttered a reproachful bark. Receiving no response from the figure standing above him, he buried his nose in his paws and drifted back to sleep.

"Lucky Fred," Annaliza said wryly. Wearily she stooped over and lifted one of the heavy buckets to the rim of the well. After sending the bucket downward, she stood still, her eyes staring into space. Her mind went back again to the hope that had stirred in the gray light of early morning. To her anxious, searching eyes, Sin had seemed a little better. He was lying quietly for one thing, and his babbling tongue was still. His face was still dry and hot to the touch, but when she had lifted his head to feed him some warm broth, he had swallowed easily, without that dreadful choking sound to which she had become shrinkingly accustomed. Later, just before she had left to get the fresh supply of water, he had opened his eyes and looked at her. It had seemed to her that he had recognized her, and yet she could not be sure. Annaliza put a hand to her trembling lips. If only she had someone to turn to—the formidable Liberty Hayes, for instance. Liberty, for all her irritating ways, gave the impression of being a rock of strength. She would know exactly what had to be done. Oh, God, she prayed silently, let Sin get better. And please, God, help us to get away from this place!

The dog awoke again as a piercing whistle sounded. Turning, Annaliza looked toward the cottage. Selwyn was standing in the doorway, his eyes on the cringing animal. "Here, Fred!" Selwyn snapped his fingers. "Come here, boy!"

Whining, his drooping tail clearly expressing the hope that he was not to be beaten again, Fred went slowly and fearfully toward his master.

Annaliza felt the hatred rising in her again. Selwyn was brutal to that poor animal. One day Fred would turn on him, and she for one would applaud. Hastily she pulled up the brimming bucket and set it down. She was about to attach the second one when footsteps on the path brought her round sharply to face Selwyn. She said the first thing that came into her mind. "Why have you shut Fred in the cottage?"

Selwyn lounged toward her, his wide grin showing a missing front tooth. "Fred's my dog, in case you've forgot. Seems to me that I can do anything I like with that cur."

"You treat that animal abominably," Annaliza said boldly. "You beat him, half-starve him. Oh, if I had my way, he would be taken away from you!"

"But you don't have your way, love, so it ain't no use working yourself into a passion. Anyway, I ain't interested in talking about Fred. I got tired of guarding the swell, so I thought I'd have myself a little change." Selwyn looked down at the bucket. "You was gone so long that I got to missing you, dearie. Taken your time getting this water, ain't you? I thought for sure you'd fallen down the well."

At the expression in his pale gray eyes, Annaliza's heart lurched in panic. "Since you watch my every movement," she said in a controlled voice, "you know better. Look, why don't you go and let Fred out. You know he hates to be shut up. I'll . . . I'll be coming in a while with the water."

Selwyn shook his head. "Now, don't you go troubling your tender little heart about Fred. He'll do very well where he is."

Annaliza backed slowly away as Selwyn took a step toward her, his eyes gloating. "Please go back inside," she said in an unsteady voice. "Sin shouldn't be left alone."

"To hell with his lordship. He ain't on my mind at this moment." Selwyn gave a short laugh as her backward passage was arrested by a low hedge. "Why, dearie," he mocked, "you nearly tumbled over that hedge. Ain't it a shame that you can't go no farther?"

"What do you want?" Annaliza cried as he halted before her.

"Use your imagination, dearie. I want you, of course." His grin reappeared as he saw her swift glance toward the cottage. "His lordship ain't going to help you none. I reckon he's done for. As for Manford and his gang, they're expecting a cargo tonight. That being so, Manford ain't going to be troubling himself to come here today. You're all alone with me, love."

"If you touch me, I'll tell Manford," Annaliza threatened.

"He ain't going to believe you. I been telling him how you've been making up to me just so's I'd let you and the lord go. Believed me, he did. Said I was to watch you extra close."

"You fool! He'll listen to anything you have to say, but when he's ready, he'll strike you down."

Selwyn shook his head. "Seems like Manford don't set too much stock by you now, girl, so it ain't no use you going

whining to him. Anyway, him and me's got an understanding. Share the girl, you might say."

"Liar!"

"Anything you say, pet. Think yourself lucky that I'm in a good mood today, or I'd knock your block off." Selwyn gripped the front of her ragged shirt. "Now, then, let's have a look at you."

Annaliza gave a cry of rage as the worn material ripped, exposing her breasts. "You swine!" Her hands flew up to cover herself.

Selwyn clicked his tongue. "You did ought to wear a chemise, love. It ain't modest to go around with your bare tits bouncing under a shirt."

"Let me past at once!" Annaliza almost screamed the words at him.

Selwyn pushed her back roughly as she tried to jostle past him. "You ain't going nowhere, sweetheart. And there's no need for you to be covering them lovely little apples of yours. Ain't but me and the gulls to see you." Smiling, he patted her sheltering hands. "I'm going to enjoy biting into them. I truly am."

"Do you think I'd let dirt like you touch me!"

"You ain't got no choice as far as I can see." Selwyn's eyes grew venomous. "A real little scissor-tongue, ain't you? I'm one for liking a bit of spirit in a lass, it makes 'em interesting, but you've gone too far and you've hurt my feelings. Now, me, I don't like getting my feelings hurt. Makes me angry, that do." With an almost idle gesture Selwyn took Annaliza's wrists in a bone-crushing grip and forced her hands away. "Let's take a decko at them tits. Nice!" he commented, his eyes fixing greedily on her naked, quivering breasts. "Very nice indeed. You've got two proper little beauties there."

"Scum!" Her eyes awakening to a defiant, blazing life, Annaliza kicked out at him, her booted foot catching him on the shin.

"You bloody little bitch!" Selwyn shouted. His hand slashed so viciously at her cheek that the force of it sent her reeling. Catching her, Selwyn clamped his hands on her shoulders and forced her to her knees. "Kick me, will you!" A hard thrust of his foot sent her sprawling on her back. "You just wait, my fine lady, I'm going to get inside you and ride you to hell and back!"

Stunned, half-fainting, Annaliza tried to struggle up, but another kick from Selwyn felled her. "Keep down, bitch!"

There was a roaring in Annaliza's ears, a dark mist before her eyes. Her arms flailed at Selwyn as he stripped the rest of her clothes away, but there was no strength in her blows. I'm so very tired! she thought. Too tired to fight off this monstrous man. Making one last effort, she panted, "For your own sake, don't do this. Manford will kill you!"

Her words made no impression on Selwyn. He had lied to Annaliza about Manford. He was afraid of him, deathly afraid, but at this moment his fury and his desire exceeded fear. Rapidly divesting himself of his breeches and his grimy underdrawers, he threw them to one side. He began to laugh as he took the swollen, throbbing length of his penis in his hand. "Funny thing, girl," he spluttered, "I never meant to prod you when I came out here. I was just going to have a bit of fun with you. But you asked for it, and now you're going to get it. Take a good look at what's going to ram you. Real pretty, ain't it? Do a good job on you, it will."

Shuddering, Annaliza closed her eyes and turned her head away. "Don't want to look, eh?" Selwyn shouted. "But you're going to feel it, girl. I'm going to fill you up, and then some!" With a snarl of rage he flung himself upon her. Forcing her legs apart, he thrust violently inside her. With his hands gripping the delicate flesh of her breasts, his sweat falling on her flinching face, he jerked and shuddered inside her in the throes of an animallike lust.

A ragged scream tore from Annaliza's straining throat as his fingers found her nipples, pinching at them, twisting viciously. "No, no!" She raked her fingernails down his healing back. "Oh, my God, you're killing me!"

Selwyn's thrust became frenzied. He was not aware when Annaliza's wild screams ceased. Exhausted, driven frantic with pain, she had simply let go, dropping fathoms deep into the dark peace of unconsciousness. Selwyn's hands left her breasts. Grunting, grasping her buttocks, he heaved her up and drove deeper.

Sin was roused from his fever-induced stupor by the excited barking of the dog. Opening his eyes, he looked dazedly about the tiny room. Where was he, and why did he feel so ill? He had been dreaming that someone was screaming. His dark brows drew together in a frown. Had those screams been part of a nightmare, or were they reality? A face jumped suddenly into his confused mind. A pale, strained face with burning, sherry-colored eyes. Annaliza! Had it been she who had made those tormented sounds?

Urged on by fear, Sin struggled upright in the bed. Fighting the inclination to sink back again, he gritted his teeth and swung his legs to the floor. The room wavered about him as he rose from the bed and lurched over to the window. Shaking his head to clear it of the rising heat that was threatening to consume him, he pressed his face to the smeared glass. A cry broke from him as he saw Annaliza lying on the damp ground, the man above her pumping into her unresisting body. Annaliza! It was she who had screamed. He must help her!

Sin swayed. Would his unsteady legs carry him to the door? They must! Annaliza had cried out for help. She needed him! Using the wall to steady himself, he made his way with agonizing slowness to the door. His trembling hand fumbling with the handle, he swung it open and stepped outside. He took another step and then another before blackness descended upon him and sent him pitching forward on his face.

Fred whined, pawing uncertainly at the fallen man. Then, a growl building in his throat, his teeth bared in a savage snarl, he streaked toward Selwyn.

16



Melton's thoughts were morose as he crawled through the seemingly endless tunnel. Behind him, Liberty crawled with fierce determination. Impeded as she was by the heavy pistol, which she had refused to surrender to him, and the large umbrella clutched in her other hand, she was still making better time than he. Had the tunnel been wider, Melton thought bitterly, she would no doubt have shot past him, with not a thought for his pride and dignity.

Trying to forget his discomfort, Melton continued to brood. He was a muttonheaded fool to allow Liberty to get him into these impossible situations, and he really should be firmer with her. He would be firmer, he decided, once they were wed. He'd not attempt to deny that he loved Liberty to distraction, but it did seem to him that the woman of his dreams, in her zeal to find Lord Sinclair, had become more than a little unhinged. And as a result of her craziness, here he was crawling like some damned insect through this cursed tunnel.

Melton sneezed violently. There was dust clogging his nostrils; his best purple silk breeches and the matching jacket with the hammered brass buttons, which he had donned in the hope of dazzling Liberty with his splendor, were quite ruined. The magnificent suit had been Lord Sinclair's last Christmas gift to him, and he cherished it. Now it was torn, stained with moss and seawater. His hands were scraped raw from his crablike passage over the innumerable sharp stones and small rocks that littered the tunnel, and his knees, fully exposed by the now tattered breeches, were fiery with pain. Would it never end? he thought, slowing his pace. It seemed to him that he had been crawling for hours, and likely his torment would go on and on. Allowing a little of his discom-

fort to spill over into words, he said moodily, "It do seem to me that there ain't no light at the end of this particular bloody tunnel."

"Shoo!" Liberty's umbrella jabbed him painfully in the rump, bringing a cry of anguish from him. "Get along, do, Melton, and don't make such an absurd fuss."

"A fuss! I'll have you know that hurt, woman!"

"It would not, if you had worn sensible garments," Liberty retorted. "Purple silk indeed! Old fool!"

Wounded to the core, Melton said truculently, "I don't see why you had to bring that umbrella. It ain't raining."

"It will." Liberty's firm voice sounded muffled in the narrow confines of the tunnel. "The clouds look menacing, as you would have seen if you hadn't been trying to play the peacock."

Smarting under this criticism, Melton turned to another grievance. "His lordship ain't going to like you taking his pistol. You'd better hand it over to me."

Liberty snorted. "Nonsense, Melton."

"But I'm telling you, my dove, it's dangerous. You don't know how to handle a great barker the likes of that. Got a hair trigger, it has."

"I assure you I am quite competent. Whereas you, by your own admission, have never fired a pistol."

Melton sneezed three times before answering. "A delicate female don't know nothing about firearms," he spluttered finally.

"Bah! You should know by now, Melton, that I am not in the least delicate. I am, for your information, an expert shot. Lord Sinclair himself taught me."

Melton blinked his watering eyes and wished he could stop long enough to blow his nose. "Why'd his lordship do a foolish thing like that?" he grumbled.

"I asked him to. In these scandalous times, a respectable woman must know how to protect herself. His lordship presented me with a weapon of my own, which was generous of him. The trouble is, it's one of those fiddling little things. Much too small for serious shooting."

Melton's heart quailed. "Serious shooting?" he repeated in a tremulous voice. "My dove, if we should stumble upon the kidnappers, what exactly are you planning to do?"

"What do you suppose?" Liberty answered calmly. "I shall shoot them, of course."

Melton swallowed. "In . . . in cold blood?"

"If it is called for."

Melton tried again. "I think, little sweetheart, that you should give me the pistol."

"And if I did, Melton, you'd likely shoot yourself by accident," Liberty said disparagingly. "Most men, with a few exceptions, are not nearly as wonderful as they think. If it should ever happen that women are given their just deserts, it will be found that they are much more capable than men."

Melton gave a short bark of bitter laughter. "Well, I for one hope it happens," he said darkly. "If women are given their just deserts, there'll be scarcely a one who don't carry the print of a man's hand on her backside."

"Language!" Liberty shrieked. "That will be more than enough from you, clatterbox!"

"Yes, my love." His small rebellion crushed, Melton lapsed into silence. Women were pesky creatures at the best of times, he reflected. Liberty, for instance, if given her head, could be very pesky indeed. If it wasn't for the fact that he was mad with love for her, he would have left her to her spinster fate. It was she who had found this tunnel. Her hare-brained idea that they would find the missing Lord Sinclair at the end of it was responsible for his present torment.

Melton yowled as a sharp-edged stone pierced his suffering flesh. Receiving another jab with the umbrella, he retreated once more into brooding silence. The discovery of the tunnel had come about by accident. Liberty, in the hope that they might find further clues, had insisted that they return to the cave where he had found Lord Sinclair's scarf. Reluctant to expose the purple silk suit to the damp atmosphere of the gloomy cave, to say nothing of the sand that would spoil the high gloss of his buckled shoes, he had told Liberty that the idea was ridiculous. "A cave's a cave," he had argued. "You'll find nothing there."

"You never know," had been Liberty's only comment.

While Melton prowled sullenly about the cave, Liberty had sat down on a jutting rock to remove the sand from her shoes. Her sharp eyes at once made a discovery. "Melton," she had called in her imperious voice, "come over here at once."

Hoping she had thought better of her foolish idea, Melton loped eagerly to her side. "What is it, my precious dove?"

Replacing her shoes, Liberty straightened up. "Over there," she said, pointing with her umbrella. "There is a space behind that rock. Push it aside, if you please."

Melton looked at the heavy rock with dismay. "But, sweetheart," he protested without much hope, "as you can see, I ain't exactly dressed for grappling with rocks."

Annoyed, Liberty tapped sharply with the umbrella. "If you want my opinion," she said severely, "you are dressed for a masquerade rather than for simple, honest county living. It needs only the mask to complete the effect."

"I'm a London gentleman, I ain't no country bumpkin."

Liberty slid down from the rock. "You are mistaken, Melton, you are certainly no gentleman." She shrugged. "Very well, since that is your unfeeling attitude, I will remove the rock myself. My strength, of course, is inferior to your own, but I daresay I shall manage."

Chastened, Melton said placatingly, "No, no, my love, it won't never do to go bruising your precious body. I'll do it."

Liberty drew herself up. "Melton, you forget yourself. I wish to hear no more talk of my body. Because I have promised to marry you, it does not follow that you have leave to indulge in indecencies."

"No, my love. I'm sorry."

"So I should hope." Liberty paused, surveying him grimly. "Well?" she went on impatiently. "What are you waiting for? Get on with it, man!"

With a sigh of resignation Melton had complied. Gazing raptly at the revealed tunnel, Liberty had cried triumphantly, "There, Melton, didn't I tell you we'd find another clue?"

Bewildered by the unusual excitement she was displaying, Melton scratched his head and said blankly, "What clue would that be, love? It's just a plain old tunnel as far as I can see. I daresay there's lots of 'em round these parts."

Liberty clicked her tongue. "Melton, don't you see the implication of a hidden tunnel in this particular cave?"

"Can't say I do," Melton said, shaking his head. "Wasn't hidden, either, or you wouldn't have spotted it."

"I believe that large rock was meant to conceal the opening, but someone replaced it carelessly."

"Someone? Who would that be, love?"

"Bone-pate! Who else but the kidnappers?"

"You can't know that for sure."

Liberty swept his objection aside. "The kidnappers had to hide Lord Sinclair somewhere, and I have a strong feeling that this tunnel will lead us to the hiding place."

"My love, you're letting your imagination run away with you. I hardly see—"

"Melton, you are wasting time," Liberty interrupted firmly. "Get down on your fat knees and crawl into that tunnel. I will follow you."

Wounded by this reference to "fat knees," his spirit finally broken, Melton had mutely obeyed. Even as he began to crawl, he was certain that the indefatigable Liberty was in for another disappointment. In the last three days they had scoured the countryside, hoping to get a lead on Lord Sinclair's whereabouts. They had asked innumerable questions of the locals, and had received uncomprehending stares in return. They had followed trails suggested by Carrington, by Ellen, and even by Mrs. Lynch, who had displayed a vast excitement at the turn of events, and it had all been to no avail. Anyone who knew anything was not about to say so. Melton had told Liberty this, but as usual, she had ignored him. "However carefully guarded a tongue may be, Melton," she had answered his objections, "it sometimes slips. That is what I am looking for, a slip of the tongue."

"Liberty, love, you listen to me. The authorities should be brought in—you know that as well as I do."

Liberty's eyes had flashed with impatience. "Of course I know it. If I had my way, that is exactly what I would do. But I can't go against her ladyship. Besides, the kidnappers might kill his lordship. I told you of that threat."

"They might kill him even if they do get the money," Melton said gloomily.

"Exactly. Which is the reason I am trying to find him."

Melton's heart began to beat faster as a sudden frightening thought occurred to him. What if they found a solid wall of rock at the end of this tunnel? They would have to turn round and go all the way back. It seemed to his inflamed imagination that they had crawled countless miles, and he really did not think he could bear a return journey. Another thing, what if the kidnappers should enter the cave after them and find the opening exposed? A pretty mess they'd be in then! The kidnappers might seal up the opening so that he and Liberty wouldn't be able to get out again. The tunnel could become their tomb!

Melton thought this last over, his racing heart slowing to a more normal beat. Smiling a little at his own foolishness, he shook his head. If the tunnel led to a dead end, then the kidnappers had no reason to be worried. On the other hand, if the tunnel did lead to the hiding place, then they had a good start, and it would do little good to seal the cave entrance.

Another poke in the rump scattered Melton's thoughts. "Look!" Liberty hissed. "There's daylight ahead. We've come to the end. Hasten, Melton, hasten!"

Needing no second bidding, Melton almost raced forward. Thank God! he thought fervently as he crawled out into the daylight. Much longer in that tunnel with its ghostly echoes, its overpowering stench of fish and rotting seaweed, to say nothing of the uncomfortable sensation it gave one of stifling to death, and he was certain that his reason would have become unhinged. Liberty would have found herself trapped in the tunnel with a gibbering lunatic, and it would have served her right. Putting these uncharitable thoughts of his beloved to one side, Melton thankfully gulped in great breaths of fresh air. Feeling somewhat revived, he started to rise, only to be pulled down by Liberty. "Be careful!" she whispered. "There is a cottage just beyond those trees. If the kidnappers should be around, we don't want to alert them to our presence."

"Got to stand up, ain't we?" Melton objected. "Can't see nothing lying on the ground."

About to answer him, Liberty gripped his arm again as another sound arose above the frenzied shrieking of the gulls. "Melton," she breathed, "that sounds like a man shouting. Do you hear?"

Melton nodded. "Hollering something awful, ain't he? I can hear a dog growling, too."

"So can I. We must find out what's amiss, Melton."

"Maybe it's one of them sheep dogs worrying at the sheep," Melton suggested.

Liberty gave him a scathing glance. "Sheep do not cry aloud in a human voice. Really, Melton, there are times when I truly believe you are lacking in your attic." She nudged him. "Take a look through that hedge, maybe you can see what's going on."

Melton stopped rubbing at his sore flesh. Acutely conscious of Liberty's eyes upon him, and wondering if a portion of his anatomy was showing through the seat of the tattered breeches, he crawled reluctantly toward the sparse hedge. "Sweet Jesus!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"What is it, Melton?"

Melton turned a shocked face to Liberty. "There's naked bodies lying all over the place. There's a bloke lying in front of the cottage door, a girl on the path, and another bloke

who's trying to fight off the dog, and none of 'em have got a stitch on!"

Liberty crawled rapidly toward him and applied her eyes to the hedge. "Melton!" Her voice quivered. "Don't you recognize your own master? That is Lord Sinclair lying before that door."

"What! How'd you know that? He's lying facedownward."

"I would recognize him anywhere, fool!"

Melton's heart sank. Now he came to think of it, the naked man had looked familiar. "If that's his lordship," he said in a quavering voice, "why ain't he got no clothes on? And who's them other two?"

"The girl, I would imagine, is Miss Annaliza. As to why they are unclothed, I have no way of knowing that. Come, Melton, get up. We must do something."

Melton goggled at her in dismay. "But what can we do? What about the kidnappers?"

Gritting her teeth at the weakness displayed by her man, Liberty drew the pistol from her capacious pocket. "The kidnapper, if he is the one being worried by the dog, is hardly in a position to stop us." She flourished the pistol menacingly. "Should there be any more skulking about—though from the looks of things I doubt it—they will be in for an unpleasant surprise."

Melton's manhood rose to meet the challenge offered by this intrepid woman. "Give me the pistol, love. I'll see to things, don't you worry."

"I have no doubt of that," Liberty said in a rare moment of tact. "However, I think you should see to his lordship. There might be something in the cottage to cover his . . . er, nakedness. I will leave that to you, Melton, and you may safely leave the rest to me."

"But, my love, I—"

Liberty rose to her feet. "Come, Melton."

Selwyn's eyes, bloodshot with frenzy, rolled toward the hedge. In that lightning glance he saw a tall, gaunt woman, pistol in hand, her skirts pulled up to facilitate movement, leaping the low hedge. Behind her came a balding stocky man in tattered clothing. "Help!" Selwyn bawled. "Get this dog off me. Shoot the bastard!"

As Melton ran toward Lord Sinclair, Liberty went to stand over the writhing Selwyn. "If you'll lie still," she said in a grim voice, "I believe you'll find the animal will be content to stand guard over you."

Selwyn froze hopefully. True to the woman's prediction, Fred also stilled. Planting his two front paws on Selwyn's chest, he growled low in his throat, his alert eyes going to the newcomer. "But he's bit me," Selwyn pleaded almost tearfully. "Can't you see the blood running down my arm? He'll likely rip my throat out if you don't shoot the swine!"

Looking away from the distasteful sight of the naked Selwyn, Liberty said coldly, "If you give me any trouble, I shall certainly encourage that animal to savage you."

"I won't give you no trouble. Honest, lady!" Selwyn's eyes went to the pistol in Liberty's hand. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Close your mouth, or I might be tempted to finish the job the animal has begun, and shoot you."

"I won't say nothing. Just don't point that pistol in my direction."

Liberty moved toward Annaliza. Her eyes soft with pity, she looked down at the sprawled girl. She saw the blood on her thighs, and she guessed what had happened. Pulling off her shawl, she draped it carefully over the naked form. "You raped this girl, you scum!" she said harshly, turning back to Selwyn. "If she dies, I'll see to it that you die too." Her eyes deadly, Liberty leveled the pistol, her finger tightening slightly on the trigger.

"She ain't going to die from a little loving!" Selwyn shouted. He tried to struggle up, but fell back again when the dog snapped dangerously close to his throat. "It wasn't no rape," he went on desperately. "That young missy wanted it bad. Kept on begging me for it. That's the truth."

"You're a filthy liar!" Liberty walked slowly toward him. "A filthy, foul-mouthed liar!"

"No! I swear I ain't." Selwyn's eyes bulged with terror as Liberty dropped to her knees beside him. "Don't shoot me," he begged. "Oh, Christ, lady, don't!"

"I'd like to, believe me I would. Fortunately for you, I'm a Christian woman." Calmly Liberty reversed the pistol and brought the butt down in a well-aimed blow to Selwyn's head. "That should hold you," she said with satisfaction, looking down at the man's slack-jawed, unconscious face. Liberty smiled as the dog whined and pushed his wet muzzle into her hand. "You approve, do you, boy? I thought you would." She stroked the animal's rough coat. "Stay with him, just in case he comes round."

"Liberty," Melton called, "his lordship's decent again. I've

wrapped him up in a mangy old blanket I found in the cottage. I searched for his clothes, but they ain't nowhere around."

Liberty rose and dusted off her gray skirt. "Well, Melton? How is he?"

"Burning up with fever," Melton answered gloomily. "We'd better get him away from here before somebody comes."

Liberty nodded. "I need something to wrap Miss Annaliza." She looked uncomprehendingly at the shredded garments lying near Annaliza. "Did you see any female attire in that cottage?"

Melton shook his head impatiently. "No, but there's another blanket on the bed. Wrap the girl in that. Hurry, woman!"

"Yes, yes." Frowning, Liberty pointed toward Selwyn. "Melton, I want you to tie and gag this varmint. After you've done that, drag him to the tunnel entrance and push him inside."

Melton stared down at Lord Sinclair's drawn face. Feeling lost before Liberty's bustling dictatorship, he had a yearning to hear his master's cool, authoritative voice. Liberty would have to watch herself then. His lordship had never been one to tolerate a commanding woman. "What do you want to do that for, Lib?"

"Don't call me Lib. Really, Melton, I should have thought it would be obvious."

"Well, it ain't." Giving in to his alarm, Melton rose to his feet. "Why can't we just leave him in the cottage?"

"Because, Melton, there may be others in this kidnapping plot." Liberty spoke with the air of one who addresses a half-witted child. "If that is so, we don't want the man to be in a position to do any talking. Get him trussed up. The four of us will wait in the tunnel until you return with a carriage."

"The four of you! Liberty, love, that don't make no sense at all."

"Unless you can think of a better idea, Melton, it seems to me that we have no choice. How far do you think we'd get with an unconscious man and a girl in like case?"

"What if there's others in the cottage when me and Carrington get back with the carriage? They won't be able to help seeing us. It ain't likely they'll just stand by and do nothing."

"They'll come after us, all right," Liberty answered calmly. "And when they do, I shall shoot them down."

Melton paled visibly. "No, Liberty, I ain't going to let you put yourself in danger. Besides, his lordship's pistol is too powerful for a woman. You go firing that thing, and the recoil will knock you flat on your back."

"I think not. I practiced with his lordship's pistol."

"You never told me that."

"Nevertheless, it is so."

"No it ain't. His lordship would never have allowed you to handle his weapon."

"I am not a liar, Melton."

"All right, maybe you ain't. Even so, I'll be the one to stay behind. You go fetch Carrington. That way, I'll be easier in my mind about you."

Liberty shook her head. "No, Melton, you will make better time than I. Do as I ask, please."

Recognizing the resolute gleam in her eyes, Melton capitulated. "Have it your way, then. But if anything happens to you, I ain't going to have much interest in living."

Liberty's eyes softened. "Old fool! Nothing's going to happen to me." She put a hesitant hand on his sagging shoulder. "Never you fear, Melton, you'll find me spry and hearty when you return. Now, get along with you!"

With Melton gone and the little group settled just inside the mouth of the tunnel, Liberty's thoughts were far from sanguine. The one bright spot in their situation, as far as she could see, was that Lord Sinclair was perspiring profusely, which meant that the fever had broken. He lay with his head pillow'd on the blanketed lap of the now conscious Annaliza. Occasionally he made small restless movements and mumbled incoherently, but his eyes had not yet opened. Watching him, Liberty sent up a fervent inner prayer that Melton would hurry. She did not like his lordship's color, and she feared if he did not soon receive the skilled attention of a doctor that he might develop lung fever. Just beyond Lord Sinclair, the dog still adamantly standing guard over him and snarling at the slightest movement, lay the gagged-and-bound Selwyn. Meeting the man's hate-filled eyes, Liberty thought of the story Annaliza had told her of the inhumane treatment Lord Sinclair had received, and of Selwyn's attack upon herself. Shocked, filled with mingled fury and pity, Liberty had yearned to turn the pistol on Selwyn.

"Liberty . . ." Annaliza's voice broke into her brooding thoughts. "Doesn't it seem to you that Melton has been gone a very long time?"

"Not so very long, Miss Annaliza." To cover her increasing anxiety for Lord Sinclair, Liberty spoke briskly. "Melton will be here soon, so there's no need to worry." She held up the pistol. "In the meantime, I have this to keep us safe."

Annaliza looked at the pistol clutched in Liberty's capable hand. "I don't think you'll have to use it. Selwyn told me that Manford and the others will not be coming to the cottage today." Seeing Liberty's quick start and her fleeting expression of relief, she added remorsefully, "I am sorry. I would have told you before, but it had quite slipped my mind."

Liberty sighed. "Small wonder," she said in a grim voice. She had been prepared to do her best in case of attack, but this Richard Manford, according to Annaliza's story, was an exceedingly dangerous man. She said doubtfully, "I wonder if we may rely on the word of that creature, Miss Annaliza?"

Annaliza nodded. "I think so, Liberty." Her eyes clouded as she looked across at the bound man. "I . . . I don't think he would have dared to touch me if he had been expecting M-Manford. He is afraid of him. All the men are."

Liberty pressed Annaliza's trembling hand warmly. "Now, don't you go fretting again, Miss Annaliza. It was not your fault. My advice to you is to wipe it right out of your mind. Easier said than done, I know, but you must try."

Surprised at this unusual sympathy from the normally acid-tongued woman, Annaliza said falteringly, "Th-thank you."

"Tush!" Liberty gave Annaliza's hand a final pat, then, with a return to her old manner, said in a prim voice, "Like most young people, you are flighty, but you have good stuff in you. As for that unwholesome creature over there"—she turned her head to glare at Selwyn—"he should be tarred and feathered, and lashed to boot!"

Annaliza averted her eyes quickly from Selwyn's hate-contorted face. "Liberty, I'm so worried about Lord Sinclair," she said, her hand touching Sin's damp hair in a lingering caress. "He's . . . he's not going to die, is he?"

Liberty looked at her sharply. "Pull yourself together, girl, there's no need to be wailing and weeping yet. Die! Never heard such nonsense in my life! You can see for yourself that the fever's broken. All his lordship needs now is some devoted nursing." Startled by the sudden light in Annaliza's eyes, she added gruffly, "Never you fear, girl, we'll pull him through together."

"Oh, yes, Liberty, we will!" Annaliza said softly. "I can be-

lieve that now." She glanced at the bound man, and some of her shining hope faded. "What do we do about Selwyn, Liberty? We can't just leave him here."

Liberty shrugged. "Once we're safely in the carriage, I'll have Melton roll him outside, where he can be seen. As for the dog, we'll take the poor starved-looking creature with us."

"His name is Fred."

"Fred?" Liberty looked grimly amused. "That's a silly name for a dog."

"Liberty, have you considered what Manford might do about this escape? He is not a man who gives up easily."

"Him!" Liberty snorted her contempt. "If this Manford comes nigh the house, he'll get a load of buckshot in his breeches. You may take my word for that, Miss Annaliza."

Annaliza laughed helplessly. "Oh, Liberty! I have never known anyone quite like you."

Hearing the slightly hysterical note in the girl's laughter, Liberty said in her most quelling voice, "Maybe that's just as well. Now, then, Miss Annaliza, no more talking. Close your eyes and go to sleep. I'll wake you when Melton arrives."

Resting her head against the rough wall, her hand lightly touching Sin's hair, Annaliza obediently closed her eyes. The last face to enter her clouded mind before sleep claimed her was Richard Manford's. His light blue eyes glittered with a malevolent light, the thin lips moved, grinding out words. "I'll be even with you, Annaliza. Sinclair, too. You'll never escape me!"

Liberty looked at Annaliza's troubled face. Poor little chick, she thought with a rush of pity, it looks like his lordship's made another conquest in you. I hope he won't break your heart. Leaning over, Liberty put a gentle hand on Sin's uninjured shoulder. "You're a wicked, graceless man," she said in a low voice, "but for all that, you're my boy, and I love you."



Annaliza was dreaming. Tossing and turning in her canopy bed, her hair lying damp on her white cambric-clad shoulders, she moaned faintly as dream turned into nightmare. Her breathing growing heavy and distressed, she was drawn back to the cave where the terror had begun.

Shivering in the unrelenting toils of her subconscious, Annaliza turned her head and looked directly at Sin. He did not look her way. Elegant as always, his attitude casual, a faint amused smile masking his inner feelings, he concentrated his attention on the enraged Richard Manford. Annaliza's heart throbbed heavily with the tearing anxiety that possessed her. Her hands felt numb as she clasped them tightly together. Sin didn't understand Manford. He couldn't deal with him as he would with a normal person. Manford was not normal; the other men had said so. His was a terrifying personality, hidden under a guileless exterior. Annaliza wanted to cry out to Sin to be careful, to say nothing that would further antagonize Manford. Even as she opened her lips to speak, she knew that it was already too late. Higgins! A strangled cry broke from her as the man crept up behind Sin. She saw the dull gleam of metal as Higgins raised his arm. "No, no!" The words came whimpering from her bitten lips as the pistol began to descend.

Gasping, Annaliza fell back as the tense atmosphere exploded into violence. She heard the booming, echoing report of a shot, a sharp pattering sound as small stones, dislodged from the jutting shelflike rocks above, came showering down in a cloud of white dust. The echoes died away, and she was breathing in the strong odor of gunpowder. Then, as though her dreaming mind had slowed up movement, showing everything in horrifying detail, Sin began to sag, taking an excruciating

ating time before he finally fell to his knees. His hand clutched at the wound in his shoulder; thick, sticky scarlet dribbled over his fingers, dulling the bright gold of his signet ring. Small details leaped out at her, imprinting themselves on her tortured mind. The ring, his slightly crooked cravat, the gleam of a diamond stickpin nestled among the silken folds, the sudden and extraordinary pallor of his face. How was it possible for such a deep, healthy brown to fade so quickly? He looked drained to her frantic eyes, dying! He was swaying, falling forward. "Oh, my God!" she screamed at Manford. "You've killed him!"

Manford's face was expressionless. The cold-blooded killing of a man meant nothing to him. Nothing at all! "He's not dead," Manford said, his curt voice carrying a tinge of amusement that mocked at her hysteria.

Not dead, not dead . . . The words scampered through Annaliza's distracted mind. She did not believe Manford, she would never believe him again. If Sin was not dead yet, he soon would be. She wanted to hold him in her arms, to pour out her hopeless love for him. The reverend's daughter and Lord Jonathan Sinclair! A bitter laugh shook her. Her imagination had indeed aimed high when she had allowed herself to believe that he might care for her. Lord Sinclair, who moved freely in royal circles, a man of wealth and power and distinction; in life he would never look her way. But perhaps in death! She had heard somewhere that death took no note of class distinction. Sin needed her now, and she did not believe that he would mock at her pathetic dream. It might even be that the knowledge of her love would comfort him as he took his first steps into the unknown. "Sin, Sin!" She began to run toward him. Her movements were slow, labored, as though something, perhaps the evil surrounding her, was trying to hold her back. By the time she reached his side, it was as if she had traveled miles. Tears blurred her eyes as she fell to her knees beside him. "I love you, Sin, so very much!" Her quivering arms reached for him, and grasped only the empty air where he had been. He was gone! Vanished with the same abruptness with which he had first entered her life.

A sob broke from Annaliza as, still caught up in the nightmare, she turned her head frantically from side to side on the pillow. "Please don't leave me!" Annaliza's feverish, rambling voice was anguished. "Come back to me, Jonathan! Oh, my

darling, come back. Let me see you once more, just once more, my darling!"

The pain of loss left her as the nightmare took another turn. She grew still, rigid, as Selwyn came toward her, ambling along the garden path, that wolfish grin that she had grown to dread on his face. Selwyn, who had butchered Sin in that ghastly operation! She felt the cold splash of water over her feet as she set the brimming bucket down hastily. Taking his hands from his pockets, Selwyn came close, stopping before her. The words he spoke, the look in his eyes, the touch of his warm, moist hands upon her, filled her with horror and revulsion. She fought him with all the strength that she could muster, but her puny efforts were akin to that of a mouse battling a tiger. Nothing she could do, nothing she could say, would stop him now. He threw her down on her back, and she felt the jar of the impact all through her tired, aching body. No use! she thought as Selwyn flung himself upon her. She could not fight him anymore, she was too exhausted. Oh, God, the stench of his unwashed flesh! The pain of his pinching, twisting fingers, the searing agony as he thrust violently inside her and began to pump like a man demented. Gagging, her fingernails clawing feebly at his heaving body, she did not try to resist the darkness when it came swirling down. It was a promise of peace, it was cessation from the pain rending her, relief from the desperate striving to keep awake at all costs, and most important of all, from agony of mind as she stood helplessly by and watched Sin's rapidly approaching death. Peace, freedom from thought—it was a black velvet rope down which she slid, going faster, faster, until at last she reached the nothingness awaiting her.

Something was trying to pull her back from the cool peace. Annaliza's head moved on the pillow in protest. It was a sound, penetrating, inescapable, a deep-throated growling that held an indescribable menace. Moaning, she fought the intrusion, but it persisted, dragging her upward to the bright and painful surface. Her heavy lids lifted reluctantly. Fred, the dog, seeming to her dazed senses to have grown as big as a lion, was savagely attacking Selwyn, who was still joined by a length of swollen, pulsating flesh to her own body. Selwyn withdrew abruptly, his arms flailing like windmills as he tried to fight off the dog. She heard his screams mingling with her own, the raw sounds of his terror pursuing her relentlessly as she fled once more into oblivion.

"Wake up!" a commanding voice said. Hands grasped An-

naliza's shoulders, shaking her back to awareness. "It's just a dream, Annaliza. Wake up, now, wake up!"

"Jonathan!" Annaliza's eyes flew open. She gazed hungrily at the dark face bent above her. "I dreamed that you were dead. And then Selwyn came. He was . . . he was . . ."

"It's over, Annaliza." Sin pulled her up from the bed and put his arms about her shivering form. "Try not to think of it anymore."

Still weakened from the effect of the nightmare, Annaliza was unable to hold back her tears. They gushed from her eyes, soaking the shoulder of his silk dressing robe. Embarrassed, she tried to pull away, but his arms tightened about her. "I'm so sorry!" she gasped. "What . . . what a terrible nuisance I am." Then, in a shaky attempt at humor: "I . . . I suppose I woke everybody again. You will all begin to hate m-me."

"Hate you?" Sin said gently. "Why, Annaliza, you underrate our affection for you." He glanced toward the group clustered in the doorway. His mother was there, her soft mouth trembling with agitation. The Reverend Sedgewick, his expression deeply concerned, stood at her side. Just behind them was Liberty, a lace-edged cap pulled low over her brow, her lips folded tightly together. "We all understand, Annaliza," Sin added. "Be very sure of that."

Liberty hustled into the room. "Now, then, my lord," she said, looking disapprovingly at Sin, "there's no sense in your sitting on that bed and further exciting the child."

"I am not a child," Annaliza said with recovering spirit.

"It would appear that his lordship holds the same opinion," Liberty said meaningfully. "However, that is scarcely the point at issue. Child or woman, you need your rest, and so, I might add, does his lordship."

"I am perfectly well, Liberty," Sin protested with unusual mildness. "I thank you for your thought, but I have had some time in which to recover."

"Six weeks to the day, to be precise, my lord," Liberty said in a voice that brooked no nonsense. She sniffed. "Ailing as you were, it is a wonder to me that you are on your feet, let alone sitting there and upsetting Miss Annaliza. Aye, and a fine worrying time we had with you, to be sure."

"My intention, Liberty," Sin said, a tinge of coldness creeping into his voice, "was not to upset Annaliza, but rather to comfort her. I remind you that I have been on my

feet these past two weeks, and that being the case, I believe I can do very well without all this fussing."

"Sin!" Lady Araminta cried from the doorway. "Oh, indeed, darling, you must not be so ungrateful. We all have much to thank Liberty for, and she only has your best interests at heart."

"That is quite true," Liberty cut in before Sin could speak. "And furthermore, his lordship knows very well that I am not in the least frightened of him, and that it is not a bit of use for him to take that tone with me." Folding her arms, Liberty looked grimly at Sin. "A fine thing it would be if I went in awe of one I tended as a child, would it not, my lady?"

Not wishing Liberty to go on in that vein, for who knew where it might lead, Lady Araminta said hastily, "Yes, yes, Liberty, I am sure you are right." She directed an appealing look at her son's broad back. "Dearest Sin, it is the middle of the night. Do you not think it would be better, perhaps even more fitting, to leave Annaliza to Liberty's excellent care?"

Sin did not turn. "Perhaps you are right, Mother." He smiled down at Annaliza. "But what do you say, little one?"

Her composure by no means restored by the disturbing feel of Sin's arms about her, Annaliza was conscious of a burning desire to shut out the rest of the world and stay where she was forever. But she must not be a fool, she told herself, which she would be if she allowed these cherished moments of closeness to deceive her. She knew well that Sin's present concern for her was not motivated by love, but rather by a remote kind of affection that was perhaps mingled with gratitude for her care of him during those horrifying days in Selwyn's cottage. The memory of the first time she had met Sin flashed through her mind, bringing with it an ache of bitter longing. There had been nothing mild about his feeling then, for he had seen her as a desirable woman. If only she could go back to that time. If only she could become his wife, or, if that was too much to expect, his mistress. Annaliza felt Sin's restless stir, and she answered him hastily. "I . . . I suppose Liberty knows best," she said in a small voice.

Despite the call she had made upon her pride, this last was delivered with such obvious regret that Sin laughed and hugged her to him. "I am preferable to the dragon, eh?" he whispered. Kissing her hair, he continued in an audible voice, "I believe that Liberty thinks I have designs on your virtue."

"My lord!" Liberty's outraged voice rose above Lady Araminta's cry of dismay. "That is hardly the thing to say,"

she went on, "when that child is still in a state of shock from her awful experience."

Even in the dim candlelight, Annaliza could see the dark flush that surged into Sin's face. "You are right to rebuke me, Liberty," he said in a difficult voice. "It was an extraordinarily tactless thing for me to say. My only excuse is that I was not thinking." Gently he laid Annaliza back against the pillows. "Forgive me, little one."

Annaliza smiled at him, her eyes warm with understanding. "There is nothing to forgive, my lord, for I know well that you meant no harm."

"Of course he did not," the reverend said unexpectedly. He advanced farther into the room. "Would you like me to sit with you for a while, Annaliza?"

Annaliza shook her head. "Thank you, Father, but I would prefer that you go back to your bed. You are looking very weary."

Moving to the bed, the reverend stooped over and took her hand in his. "I must confess that I look as I feel." He patted her hand and then released it. "I hope you will sleep undisturbed, child."

"She will, sir," Liberty said. "I'll see to it."

Lady Araminta gave a nervous laugh. "Try concentrating on your coming journey to London, Annaliza," she advised. "It will take your mind off unpleasant things."

"I will do that." Annaliza raised herself in the bed and smiled at her. "It is very kind of you to invite me," she added, nodding reassuringly at the agitated little lady. "I am looking forward to it."

"Oh, so am I, Annaliza. I always wanted a daughter, you know. I will have such a wonderful time dressing you up and showing you off."

Sin turned his head and looked at her. "Annaliza is not a doll, Mother. It might be that she will not care for those things."

Lady Araminta beamed at him absently. "But of course she will care, darling. It would be a strange girl indeed who despised pretty clothes and balls and parties, to say nothing of handsome escorts."

"I think you must allow Annaliza to decide for herself how she wishes to go on." Sin's tone was suddenly chill. "But remember this, Mother, I will not have Annaliza badgered, or paraded at endless parties, if this is not her wish."

Somewhat daunted, Lady Araminta blinked at him anx-

iously. It occurred to her that Sin had sounded almost jealous. Could it possibly be that he cared for the girl? She hesitated; then, deciding that her imagination was working overtime, or that it was wishful thinking on her part, she went on in a bright voice, "It is not the slightest use for you to object, Sin, for I tell you to your head that men know nothing about these things." She smiled at Annaliza. "You must not mind Sin. We are going to have a very gay and frivolous time, are we not, dear child?"

Swallowing a yawn with some difficulty, Annaliza smiled in silent agreement. "My dear Araminta," the reverend put in, with a fond glance at his daughter, "Annaliza is not used to such a life as you describe, and I think she will agree with me that too much frivolity is bad for one." He glanced at Annaliza, who quickly averted her eyes from his expectant face. "I must request you, Araminta, to see to it that my daughter attends church each Sunday. I would not wish you to send me back a changed girl."

Lady Araminta pouted. "Don't be so stuffy, Giles. We Londoners are not forever thinking of church."

The reverend looked at her sternly. "I know I have given my consent to this visit, Araminta, but I could just as easily withdraw it."

"You must not dream of doing so," Lady Araminta exclaimed in distress. She sighed. "If Annaliza desires to attend church, I would not for the world stand in her way."

"I should hope not," Liberty said in a rebuking voice, "London being the sinful city it is." She directed a quelling look at her mistress. "My lady, although it is not my place to dictate to you, yet I feel that I must point out that this is hardly the time for a discussion of such light nature." Liberty's critical, condemning eyes swept the little group, settling longest on Lord Sinclair, whom she seemed to regard with dire suspicion. "I pray you to depart for your beds," she concluded firmly, "otherwise I will not be answerable for Miss Annaliza's condition."

"Of course, Liberty," Lady Araminta said with guilty haste. "I don't know what we were thinking of. Come, now, everybody, we must leave Annaliza to her rest."

"Good night, little one." Smiling, Sin pressed a light kiss on Annaliza's forehead. "Promise me to sleep well."

"I promise." Obeying a natural impulse, Annaliza caught Sin's hand in hers. "Thank you for being here when I needed

you," she said softly, holding his hand to her cheek. "Good night, Jonathan."

Sin gave her a long considering look before gently withdrawing his hand. He hesitated, as though he would say more; then, changing his mind, he rose from the bed and headed for the door.

In the corridor, with Annaliza's door firmly closed against them, they once more bade the reverend good night. Proceeding on, Sin escorted his mother to her bedroom. "Get your head down on the pillow, Mother," he instructed, "and don't dare to lift it until at least noon."

"I won't." Lady Araminta touched his arm with gentle fingers. "And you, darling? Will you go to bed now?"

"In time. I am in no hurry."

"Well, you know," Lady Araminta said, frowning, "I must agree with Liberty in one thing. You have been very ill, and you should rest more than you do."

"I am fully recovered, and I am not the type to lie around." Sin smiled at her, his dark eyes lighting with that special warmth which seemed to be reserved exclusively for her. "In regard to Liberty, you know quite well, Mother, that you agree with her in all things. You would not dare to do otherwise."

Lady Araminta giggled. "And pray what of yourself? I have noticed that you often do Liberty's bidding."

"Only when I am foxed," Sin retorted. "There is something about liquor that triggers the mind to uncomfortable memories of youth, and Liberty's dread, hovering shadow. And what is your excuse, Mother?"

"Well, darling, Liberty is such a martinet, though, I must admit, a loving one. Nevertheless, it is very fatiguing to be forever battling with someone who is determined to have the last word."

Sin's brows rose. "I fear you are a coward, Mother."

Lady Araminta nodded amiably. "Yes, dear, that is no secret. Liberty is so . . . so overpowering, and she usually turns out to be right." She nibbled pensively at the tip of her little finger. "You know, Sin, I sometimes wonder whether poor Melton has made quite the right choice of mate. What do you think?"

"Have no fear for Melton. He is obviously a man who revels in punishment. He was born to be dominated by a female. He will settle down quite happily with Liberty."

"But such a woman would not do for you. Is it not so, darling?"

"You are quite correct."

Lady Araminta gave him a sly, smiling glance. "Then perhaps your taste lies with someone like Annaliza? For you will admit that she is sweet and docile enough to suit your dominating personality."

"Annaliza!" Sin's eyes widened in genuine astonishment. "You actually see that minx as sweet and docile? I think, Mother, that you must be a very bad judge of character."

"I am not," Lady Araminta protested. "Annaliza seems to me to be an unexceptional girl. Also, she is brave and loyal."

"She is certainly the last two, as I have good cause to know. But she is no demure little miss. When she is roused, she is a tigress."

"I can't believe that, Sin. You are exaggerating."

"I am not. She is dormant for the moment, it is true. But once she recovers from the shock she received, she will rapidly become her old self."

"Really, Sin!" Lady Araminta looked at him anxiously. "I thought you liked Annaliza."

"I do. There are many things I admire about her."

"Well, then?"

"That is as far as it goes." Sin smiled somewhat mockingly. "I know quite well how you are thinking, Mother, for you are an open book to me. If you imagine for one moment that wedding bells will shortly be ringing, you may disabuse your mind of the idea."

Lady Araminta sighed. "Ah, well, I suppose Annaliza is rather too plain in looks to suit you."

"Plain!" Sin's face flushed with a sudden burning resentment. Surprised himself at the violence of his reaction, he said in a tightly controlled voice, "You cannot be suggesting that Annaliza is plain. Really, Mother, either you are joking or your eyesight is failing you."

Dismayed by the sudden flash of anger that her son could not altogether hide, Lady Araminta drew back a step. "Perhaps I . . . I am mistaken," she offered in atonement.

"Certainly you are. It is obvious even to the meanest intelligence that Annaliza is beautiful."

"Dear boy, it is not necessary to be rude."

Sin's flush deepened, and he looked slightly shamefaced. "I'm sorry, Mother. I did not intend to be."

Lady Araminta forgave him at once. She was keenly aware

that this was not the old, arrogant Sin who stood before her. His anger notwithstanding, there was something about him in that moment that was uncertain, almost confused, as though he was having difficulty in understanding himself. Could it be that he cared for Annaliza, and refused to acknowledge it? Her heart going out to him, she said warmly, "I am sorry too, dear. It was certainly not my intention to anger you."

"But you have not. What makes you think I am angry?"

"I don't quite know, dear," Lady Araminta answered, hastily seeking neutral ground. "Possibly it was my imagination."

"It must have been. It would be ridiculous of me to become angry over such a little thing." Sin hesitated, and then went on in explanation, "It is just that I cannot understand why you would say such a thing."

"I lost my head?" Lady Araminta offered in a slightly satirical voice.

Not noticing the satire, Sin brushed the questioning remark aside. "There is Annaliza, too. I have listened to the same kind of nonsense from her. Frankly, Mother, it makes me impatient."

"Dearest," Lady Araminta soothed, "you are making too much of it. Annaliza is surely entitled to her opinion."

"But I do not believe it is her opinion—that is just the point."

"What makes you say that?"

Sin made an impatient gesture. "Because I have not the slightest doubt that she is dangling her line, hoping to hook a compliment."

Lady Araminta smiled inwardly. "That must be it, darling."

His dark brows rising, Sin regarded her intently. "I am well aware that you are humoring me, Mother, and I think we will have no more of that." Reaching past her, he turned the handle of the bedroom door and pushed it wide. "Be off with you, you shameless hussy."

"So that is what you think of your own mother. Shame on you!"

Sin saw her faint smile, and his own flashed out in response. "That is what I think," he answered calmly, "and I am not in the least ashamed."

"That is because you are beyond redemption."

"Of course. Therefore you won't be surprised if I tell you something else I think."

"And what is that?"

Sin prodded her cheek with a teasing finger. "I think that my father's own interest would have been best served had he beaten you regularly."

Lady Araminta regarded him with mock indignation. "And how do you know that he did not?"

Sin laughed. "Are you going to rejoice my heart and tell me that he did?"

"I will not give you the satisfaction." Lady Araminta was enjoying herself immensely. For one thing, she had not felt so close to her son in years, and for another, she nourished the hope that Sin and Annaliza might make a match of it. Annaliza was not precisely the girl she would have chosen to become her son's wife, since she did not move in the first circle, but she was the daughter of an old and well-loved friend, and if Sin's heart was inclined toward her, it was all that mattered. Becoming aware that Sin was frowning and pointing toward the bed, Lady Araminta shook her head defiantly. "You cannot bully me, my son," she said, smiling.

"Can I not? Would you like to test the truth of your statement?"

"No, for I know full well that you are quite capable of picking me up and carrying me to the bed."

"I am glad you realize that."

"I will retire in a few moments," Lady Araminta said hastily. She frowned thoughtfully. She wished to further discuss the tantalizing if touchy subject of Annaliza, but she did not quite know how to proceed. Searching her mind for an opening, she put out a tentative feeler. "You know, Sin," she said in a bright voice, "I have grown quite fond of Annaliza."

"You would need to be, since you have invited her to stay with you for an indefinite period. I hope you may not regret it, for I warn you again that Annaliza is not the sweet and submissive girl you believe her to be."

"In that case, I will have to take a firm line with her."

"Leaving aside the fact that you have no notion of how to be firm, I wish you well."

Lady Araminta looked at him anxiously. "You do not mind that I invited Annaliza without consulting you?"

"You do most things without consulting me, Mother, and the devil's own mess you make of things at times. But to answer your question, no, I do not mind in the least."

"Oh, good." Lady Araminta smiled happily. "Dear Sin, we will have such wonderful times together."

"No we won't," Sin said firmly. "If you are entertaining

notions of dragging me off to a series of dreary functions, you may put it out of your head."

"Sin!" Lady Araminta wailed, her newborn hope of a union fading. "You surely do not mean to abandon Annaliza?"

"With the escorts you are no doubt mentally lining up for her, she will not miss me."

"I'm quite sure you are wrong."

"Be that as it may, Mother, I do not shine at the sort of affairs you favor."

Her disappointment overcoming her, Lady Araminta said tartly, "If I could arrange for a smoke-filled gambling hall peopled with your rakehell friends and bold females in various states of undress, you might then be persuaded to honor us with your presence."

Sin laughed. "Ah, Mother, I fear you know me too well." He looked at her with assumed innocence. "But why did you mention it? Have you that sort of arrangement in mind?"

"Sin!"

Sin ignored her exclamation. "I think it's a very good idea," he went on. "From what I know of Annaliza, she would enjoy it. But you, mother, you would be sadly out of your element."

"How can you! That is quite enough, Sin. I will listen to no more."

"I didn't think you would. Go to bed, Mother."

"In a moment."

"Now!"

Resigned, Lady Araminta gave in. There was a note in Sin's voice that she recognized, for she had heard it many times in the past. It meant that he was aware of her intentions, and that no matter how cleverly she might fish for information as to the nature of his feelings for Annaliza, he was not prepared to accommodate her. Really, she thought, feeling ill-used, he could be remarkably taciturn at times, but in that, he was like his father. She sighed. "Very well, Sin, since you insist, I will go to bed. But I think you should do the same."

Sin shook his head. "I'm not tired. I'll go downstairs and sit in the reverend's study for a while."

"The room will be cold," she objected.

"Then I'll kindle a fire. I have some thinking to do." He began to move away, and then halted and turned to face her. "You know, don't you, that Manford is still missing? So far, the authorities have failed to turn up one clue to his where-

abouts. Also, by a not unexpected coincidence, Selwyn and those others I could identify have very conveniently vanished."

"Yes, Sin, I know. Nevertheless, you must leave it to the authorities to find these men."

"Oh, I intend to. All I want is a chance to face Manford and Selwyn again."

"And how do you propose to do that? Once they are apprehended and given a trial, they will be lodged in prison."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Sin said thoughtfully. "You must remember that magistrates as well as the local inhabitants benefit from the smuggling activities of Manford and his ilk."

"That is a terrible thing to say."

"I know. But nevertheless I believe it to be true." Sin's smile was faintly cynical. "If Manford and his followers spend more than one day in prison, I shall be very surprised. I have garnered a great deal of information lately on smugglers and their activities. I have learned, for instance, that many apprehended smugglers go free, simply because no one will testify against them."

"But . . . but why not?"

"As I understand it, Cornishmen are very clannish. And then, of course, avarice plays a part in their refusal to give testimony."

"And where did you get this information?"

"From your swain."

Lady Araminta flushed. "From my what? Sin, what on earth are you talking about?"

Sin laughed. "Do you mean to tell me, Mother, that your feminine intuition has not informed you of the reverend's growing tenderness for you?"

Lady Araminta's flush deepened to a vivid scarlet. "I do wish you would not talk nonsense," she said in a flustered voice. "You surely cannot imagine that someone of Giles's age, to say nothing of his particular calling, would be thinking in romantic terms."

"Why not? The reverend's calling does not preclude romance. Annaliza is the proof of that." Sin's dark brows quirked in amusement. "I tell you, Mother, that you have so aroused the lurking savage in him that a grand passion now smolders in the reverend's breast. Also, from signs I have been noticing, I am sure that you return it."

"Really, Sin, whatever will you say next! Giles looks upon me as a friend. I assure you it is nothing more than that."

Sin winked at her, thereby adding considerably to her confusion. "Assure me of nothing," he said in a low, purposely dramatic voice. "A mere friendship is far from the reverend's thoughts at this moment. You may take my word for it."

Lady Araminta filed this piece of information away for further and pleasurable reference. "Next you will be making plans for the wedding, I suppose?"

"Why, yes, I have given it a thought or two, and I have decided to give my consent."

"Sin!"

He touched her cheek gently. "The formidable Liberty is thinking along the same lines. So I think, in sheer self-defense, that you will have to marry him."

Lady Araminta looked into his laughing eyes. "I never know what to make of you. One moment you are so grave, so cold, so . . . almost hard, and the next you are like a mischievous boy."

"You think so, do you! And which do you prefer?"

"I adore you in all your aspects," Lady Araminta assured him, smiling tenderly. "But I think I prefer the rarely seen mischievous boy."

"In that case, when I stand up with you for your wedding, you shall have the boy. And may heaven help you."

Lady Araminta longed to linger, but knowing that he would see through her, she took refuge in an assumed haughtiness. "Scoundrel! I will not stand here talking nonsense. If and when I am ready to marry, I will let you know. And may I ask, knowing how tired I am, why you are keeping me here talking?"

"So it is subterfuge now. Woman, you are full of deceit."

Lady Araminta tossed her head. "I am not. I tell you again that I am very tired."

"I beg your pardon, dear madam." Sin made her a mock bow. Kissing her on the forehead, he turned away and moved over to the stairs. "It was thoughtless of me to keep you standing there, when you have been assuring me for this past hour that you wished to retire."

Lady Araminta dismissed the laughing sarcasm as a new and disturbing thought entered her mind. "Sin, will you promise me to think no more of Manford? I would prefer you to put the events of these past weeks out of your mind, for you must know that Manford is a very dangerous man."

Sin paused and looked back at her. "And so am I, Mother," he said grimly. "So am I! I think perhaps that Manford will be sorry that he tangled with me."

"What do you mean?" Lady Araminta cried. "What are you intending to do?"

"At this time, nothing. But I don't intend to leave the matter there."

Lady Araminta wrung her hands together. "I would feel so much easier if you would forget about him."

Sin's expression hardened. "You ask the impossible. I won't forget Manford, or Selwyn."

"Does . . . does this mean you will be staying in Cornwall?"

Sin shook his head. "No, I will be accompanying you to London, as we planned. It is simply that I have a feeling that Manford and I are destined to meet again, and my hunches have a way of coming true." He smiled. "Don't worry about it, Mother. Go to bed and dream of your reverend."

"Sin, for my sake, couldn't you—?"

"No, Mother, I could not," Sin said firmly. Flapping his hand in farewell, he proceeded down the stairs.

Lady Araminta stood there frowning, filled with uneasiness. Then, refusing to let herself be concerned by such an improbable happening as a further meeting between Manford and her son, she stepped into her room and closed the door behind her.



The November sunshine, with its mocking illusion of warmth, vanished behind the rapidly banking clouds, bringing an added chill to the already frigid air.

Richard Manford turned up the collar of his navy-blue frieze jacket as rain began to fall from the slate-gray sky. Scowling, he wandered moodily to the water's edge. He glanced at the three-masted vessel standing well out to sea. It had fancy red sails and its hull was painted red and white. Manford's thin lips curled in contempt. The frigate had once been named the *Iron Horse*, and its great guns had spit out a message of death to any who might menace England, but now it had become the property of Lord Winfield of Truro. Painted in fancy colors, renamed the *Saucy Sal*, it was used by Lord Winfield and his friends for parties, luxurious fishing expeditions, and the general pursuit of pleasure.

Manford returned his eyes to the rain-dimpled water, watching the hissing advance of the foam-crested rollers. He smiled as the rollers crashed noisily to the shore, sending great sheets of spray into the air. Saturated, Manford stepped back several paces, his feet sinking into the wet sand. The water, bearing with it the usual debris of the sea, curled creamy over his sturdy boots, then receded to give place to the next onslaught. Manford made no effort to move again; he knew he was safe. The unwary might be swept out to sea by the thundering breaking walls of blue-green water, but he knew the vagaries of the tides. The sea was his friend, and there was nothing he enjoyed more than bracing himself against the elements.

Looking down, Manford noticed a shell caught among the sea debris. Stooping, he picked it up. The shell was fluted on the outside, light brown in color, its inside a soft pink. The

same kind of pink that Annaliza had been wearing this morning. His eyes turning malignant with this last thought. Manford stared at the shell a moment longer, turning it over and over in his cold chapped hands; then, with a furious exclamation he threw it down on the sand and ground it beneath his heel.

Annaliza! His rage mounting, Manford gritted his teeth together. That skinny bitch, with her meager breasts and her flat, boyish hips! He no longer wanted to marry her, but for all that, he was determined to have her. He'd stuff himself inside her scrawny body and ride her until she screamed for mercy. He would make her rue the day she'd turned from Richard Manford in disloyalty. He would leave his imprint on her, if it was the last thing he did. By the time he was through with her, she would have only a broken and useless body to offer any man who might look her way. And Lord Sinclair! Did Sinclair think he could spy on him and get away with it? No, by Christ, he would show him differently. That superior bastard with his airs and graces, his drawling, educated voice, his high-bred handsome looks, had looked at him with open contempt in his dark eyes. Sinclair would pay for that look, too, for Manford allowed no man that privilege, not even the high-and-mighty Lord Jonathan Sinclair. Sinclair, like Annaliza, would be very sorry that he had crossed Richard Manford's path.

Manforth's mouth tightened, and his blue eyes narrowed to glittering slits. Sinclair had not only ruined his plans for easy money, but because of the furor created by Lady Sinclair and the Reverend Sedgewick, he and his men had been forced to hide, thus missing out on many valuable cargoes. There had been an attempt at kidnapping, and the victim was a very important man. This being so, the officials of the law, while making no attempt to apprehend them, required from the culprits at least a token gesture to their authority. For their forbearance, of course, they expected to profit greatly from the cargoes of smuggled goods. Manford's hands clenched. Well, damn the officials of the law! Curse Sinclair! Everybody would have to wait for the rich pickings until Sinclair had returned to London and Manford and his crew could walk openly abroad. Somehow, knowing men, he felt that the case would be dropped when Sinclair departed, but it would not be forgotten. Unless he was greatly mistaken in his estimate of the man, Sinclair would not seek justice from the law. He was the type who preferred a personal revenge.

Oh, yes, one of these days he would come seeking his enemy. Manford smiled mirthlessly. Well, he would not need to seek far. He, too, he determined, would travel to London. Let Sinclair beware, for he was by no means done with him, nor with Annaliza!

Frightened by the drumming of the blood in his ears, Manford breathed in deeply, letting the breath emerge slowly. Gradually his racing heart slowed to a normal beat and the drumming in his ears faded. That was better, he told himself. It had never been his policy to let rage and hatred overpower him. A man could make serious mistakes in judgment if he allowed anger to weaken him. His time would come when he once more confronted Sinclair.

Icily calm now, Manford turned his thoughts to the scene he had witnessed this morning. He was unable to fathom what had drawn him from his latest hiding place, especially at that particular time of day, for it was very early in the morning when he had made his way to the reverend's house. He could only assume that intuition had been at work, warning him that his prey was about to escape him. Hidden from sight by a stand of trees that grew nearby, he had watched Annaliza come out of the house and get into a waiting carriage. In her pink gown, with her shining, normally straight hair arranged in curls beneath a matching pink bonnet, she had been far removed from the Annaliza he was accustomed to, almost a stranger, in fact. As far as he knew, she had never owned such an elegant gown, so she must have recently gone shopping.

Manford's eyes turned to the woman following her. She was plump and pretty, and well advanced into middle age. She was fashionably dressed in a gown of moss-green silk. Manford could hear the rustling of the rich material as she walked. Amber lace decorated the heart-shaped neckline, the hem, and foamed from the wide cuffs of the long, full sleeves. A small green bonnet with an amber feather curling about the brim was set on graying blond hair.

Manford had felt a stab of anger as he stared at her. Unless he was much mistaken, he was looking at Lady Sinclair. Fat, interfering bitch! For thus, in his anger, and conveniently forgetting his own preference for a well-endowed woman, did Manford designate Lady Sinclair's pleasingly rounded figure. Malice as bitter as bile surged inside him. One of these days he'd make the grand lady a present of her son's dead body. Sinclair would not be a pretty sight when

he'd done with him, for he would carve that handsome face of his to ribbons.

Manford's attention went next to the woman following closely behind Lady Sinclair. Tall, painfully thin, her lined face set in severe lines, she was plainly dressed in a dark brown gown of a thick material. Her hair was tucked out of sight beneath a serviceable brown bonnet that was innocent of feathers or even the suggestion of ribbon trimming. The stocky man walking beside her, puffing under the weight of two large cases, was hatless, and his thinning hair showed bald patches that gleamed in the early-morning sun.

Manford fingered the pistol in his pocket, his eyes narrowing. He recognized the thin woman and the stocky man from Selwyn's description. The stocky man, gesturing to the driver to aid him, climbed to the roof of the carriage, where he strapped the cases securely in place. Waiting until the driver had resumed his seat on the high perch, he crawled forward and seated himself beside him.

The severe-faced woman turned her face to the open door of the house; then, shaking her head disapprovingly, she, too, got into the carriage.

Lady Araminta stuck her head out of the carriage window, the feather on her bonnet fluttering in the steadily rising wind. "Sin!" She gestured with a small green-mitten hand. "Do come along, darling. Annaliza is anxious to be on her way."

Lord Sinclair, the reverend beside him, appeared in the doorway. "A moment, Mother," the drawling voice that Manford remembered so well said. "The reverend has something for Annaliza."

The Reverend Sedgewick, a small book clutched in his hand, came hastening down the path. "I would like you to have this book of prayers, Annaliza." His voice, borne by the wind, carried clearly to Manford's ears. "It belonged to your mother, and now I am making a gift of it to you. It would please me if you would read a verse or two every night."

Old fool! Manford thought, as Annaliza's pink-gloved hand reached out to take the book. "Thank you," her voice said. "You will remember to take care of yourself, won't you, Father."

"Of course, dear." Looking faintly wistful, the reverend added, "However, I do wish you were not going so far away, child."

"Oh, Giles!" Lady Sinclair's clear, slightly impatient voice answered for the girl. "One would think, to listen to you, that dear old London was at the other side of the world."

The reverend appeared to take offense at this, for he answered with a trace of stiffness, "I have been to London several times, Araminta. So do not make it appear that I am a stranger to our capital."

Manford smiled in inner triumph. So now he knew where Annaliza was going. "I'll be looking you up, you bitch!" he muttered beneath his breath. "Once I arrive in London, it won't take me long to find the Sinclair house." Manford's eyes went to Lord Sinclair, who had now joined the reverend beside the carriage. He was dressed in a suit of fine black broadcloth. The well-fitting jacket was fastened high at the throat, showing only a narrow ruffle of lace above; a more extravagant fall spilled from the cuffs, half-hiding his ringed hands. Black trousers, showing not the faintest wrinkle, were strapped tightly beneath gleaming hessian boots. He carried a caped coat over his arm, and his hair was hidden beneath a tall hat with a rakishly curling brim. The ensemble was plain in the extreme, but whereas most men might have looked drab, too somber, he looked outstanding and distinguished. Even in a world grown used to more colorful array, Manford thought grudgingly, eyes would turn to look after the quietly elegant Sinclair.

Frowning fiercely, biting at his lip, Manford gave himself up to hot and resentful thoughts. Hate Sinclair though he could and did, there was, he had to admit, something about the cursed man that drew admiring attention.

"Don't worry about Annaliza, sir," Manford heard Sinclair say. "We will take care of her."

"I can take care of myself," came Annaliza's sharp retort. "There is no need to disturb your life on my account, my lord."

"I am glad to hear you say so," Sin answered mockingly, "for I have no intention of doing so."

Annaliza's flushed face appeared at the window. "You are insufferable!" she flashed. "Were it not for the fact that I had promised your mother to stay with her for a while, I would leave this carriage at once."

"Sweet Annaliza!" Sin's smile mocked her. "You must not let your finer feelings stand in the way of your desire."

"My only desire is to see as little of you as possible. Indeed, once it becomes known to your numerous women

that Lord Sin has returned to London, I have every hope of that desire being gratified."

"My women?" Sin said in a purring voice. "Jealous, Annaliza?"

"Oh, you . . . you . . . I hate you!"

"What has come over you, Annaliza?" The reverend sounded profoundly shocked. "How can you be so rude, so unmanly!"

"Ask my Lord Sin. For these last two days he has not left me alone. He is continually baiting me."

"I fear that she does have right on her side, sir," Sin said ruefully. "Perhaps I went a little too far, Annaliza, and for that I apologize."

"I do not accept it," Annaliza flashed. "If you prefer that I do not accompany you to London, why can you not say so, instead of cutting at me with that hateful, sarcastic tongue of yours?"

"I am looking forward to your company on the tedious journey," Sin said lightly.

"Liar!"

"Annaliza!" the reverend cried. "That is quite enough."

"She does not mean it, Giles," Lady Araminta put in hastily.

The reverend dismissed her well-meant intervention. "You are most good-natured, Araminta, but I cannot take advantage of that. I think, under the circumstances, it would be best that Annaliza forgo the visit." Avoiding his daughter's flushed and angry face, he gazed earnestly at Lady Sinclair.

"Oh, no, Giles." Lady Sinclair put a beseeching hand on the reverend's black-clad arm. "You must remember that Annaliza is still not quite herself, which accounts for her display of fireworks." Removing her hand, she turned an indignant face to her son. "Really, Sin, I blame you for this. You can be very exasperating at times. You will not deny that."

"Undoubtedly," Sin agreed.

"You see, Giles," Lady Sinclair said triumphantly, "it is a storm in a teacup, signifying nothing. Annaliza does not really hate Sin." Her nervous laugh sounded again. "I have yet to meet the woman who could hate him."

"I can name you quite a few, Mother," Sin's drawling voice put in.

The reverend looked from one to the other, then said in a vacillating voice, "Nevertheless, Araminta, my daughter has

been brought up to know better. I cannot think that rudeness deserves a treat."

"Come, Giles," Lady Sinclair protested. "You must remember that Annaliza is no longer a child."

"She has behaved like one."

"But, Giles, it would be cruel to forbid her to go. She has been so looking forward to the visit."

"I am trying my poor best to think of you, Araminta. You must know, if Annaliza remains at daggers-drawn with Jonathan, that it will be most uncomfortable for you."

Lady Sinclair gave a heartrending sigh. "It will be all right, Giles, I do assure you. Dear Sin is so seldom at home, having other things to do than to be with his poor lonely mother. Annaliza will be company for me, and I know you would not begrudge me that."

"My mother is right, sir," Sin said, his unruffled air ignoring the reproach. "As she has told you, I am seldom at home, so your daughter's shrewish temper will not often be exacerbated by my unwelcome presence."

"If that is indeed so, my lord," Annaliza retorted spiritedly, "then I am overjoyed to hear it. Father, I admit that I deserve your rebuke, for I know that I have behaved like a bad-tempered child." She directed a speaking look at Lord Sinclair. "Though not without provocation. However, the truth of the matter is that I am not a child, so I think it up to me to make up my own mind about going to London."

"Annaliza," Lady Sinclair said anxiously, "I thought it was all settled. Don't tell me you have changed your mind?"

"Not exactly." Annaliza's voice was softer now. "Not, that is, if you really want me. Do you? You may tell me the truth, you know. I can promise you that I will not be offended."

"I do want you," came Lady Sinclair's prompt reassurance. "I have grown exceedingly fond of you, Annaliza, and I know that Sin, despite his sometimes unfortunate manner, feels the same."

Annaliza's sherry-colored eyes fastened on Sin's imperturbable face. "How very interesting." Now it was her voice that was laced with mockery. "Do tell me about this great affection that you have for me, my lord."

Manford grinned to himself as he heard Lord Sinclair's icy reply. "My dear Annaliza, you must not let your imagination work overtime. While it is true that I have a mild affection for you, there is really nothing more to it than that."

"I quite understand, my lord." Annaliza's voice was like-

wise icy. "You would have an affection for a cat or a dog, and you are telling me that you have placed me in the same category. Is it not so?"

Sin shrugged. "If it pleases you to think so."

"It does please me." Annaliza's voice rose, became almost shrill. "Any stronger emotion from you would repel me."

"Be silent!"

"I shall say what I please. I am not one of your women. You cannot order me around."

"Annaliza. Stop this!" The note of distress in the reverend's voice was pronounced. "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"Let her rave, sir," Sin said to the reverend. "Once the spleen is out of her system, she will be the better for it." Straightening his lounging figure, he turned a cool gaze on Annaliza. "Well, Miss Spitfire, do you come with us or do you not? I would like to be on my way, if, of course, you have no objection."

Ignoring him, Annaliza spoke directly to Lady Sinclair. "I will come with you, Lady Araminta. You, at least, have been very kind to me." She hesitated. "I apologize to you for my rudeness to your son. But that apology is for your sake, not for his."

"Of course, dear," came Lady Sinclair's flustered reply. "You are upset at this moment, and you must not think I do not understand the feeling. I am sure that you did not mean one word you said."

"Of course she meant it, my lady," Liberty's grim voice said. "And why not, I should like to know. Lord Sinclair, as you are well aware, could provoke a saint, let alone Miss Annaliza."

"Thank you for your opinion, Liberty," Lady Sinclair said coldly.

"Right is right, my lady."

"Yes, Liberty. Thank you. However, I think that will be quite enough."

"If you say so, my lady."

"I do say so. Pay no attention to Liberty, Annaliza. I know very well that my son has ruffled your feelings, but it is a passing thing."

"I am not upset, Lady Araminta," Annaliza replied with a trace of heat. "I assure you that I am perfectly calm and collected. The truth is that I meant every word I said to your

son. If, in view of that, you would like to withdraw your invitation, I will quite understand."

"Oh, la!" Lady Araminta sighed. "You must not be so hasty, child. We are going to have a wonderful visit together. You will love London, and in time, you will come to love Sin."

"I take leave to doubt that, Lady Araminta," Annaliza retorted sharply. "London I am sure I will enjoy, but I have not now, nor ever will have, any feeling toward your son."

"But of course you will learn to love me," Sin said before Lady Araminta could reply. "In my mother's view, all females succumb to my dazzling charm."

Annaliza had sat back, but at this provocation her flushed face once more appeared beside Lady Araminta's. "I am no ordinary female, Lord Sinclair. You may strike my name from the list of your many admirers, for I will not, as you put it, succumb."

"A pity." Lord Sinclair's laugh sounded full and robust in Manford's ears. "You are so delightfully easy to tease, Annaliza."

"Was it teasing, my lord?"

"It was indeed. But there, I see you are determined to take everything I say seriously. Do you really think me a creature of such monumental conceit?"

"I do, my lord," Annaliza answered, glaring at him.

Sin shook his head in defeat. "Then I must bow to your opinion, my little fury." He smiled. "Will it please you if I remain silent on the journey?"

"It will, my lord, for I have nothing to say to you."

"Dear Annaliza! But you really must sheathe your claws, or else my mother will be sadly disillusioned."

There was a small, awkward silence. To cover it, Lady Araminta said brightly. "There, Giles, all is settled. Now you cannot have the smallest objection to Annaliza accompanying us."

"I fail to see that anything is settled, Araminta," the reverend remarked gloomily. "However, as your heart is set on this folly, I withdraw my objection." He looked from Sin's faintly smiling face to Lady Araminta's earnest one. "I hope you may not regret it."

"I will not regret it, Giles. I know that I shall enjoy every moment of Annaliza's company."

"If you say so." The reverend looked severely at Annaliza,

noting her unrepentant expression. "I trust you will behave yourself, child?"

"I intend to give every courtesy to Lady Araminta," Annaliza replied. With a smile for her father, and a haughty look in Sin's direction, Annaliza settled back.

Shaking his head, the reverend placed his hand over Lady Araminta's mittenred fingers. "Minta," he said in a low voice, "I feel sure you have guessed that there is much of a private nature that I would like to say to you. But now is not the time."

"Yes, dear Giles, I have guessed."

The reverend's thin face flushed. "Thank you, Minta. I knew you would understand."

Lady Araminta's fingers turned in his, grasping warmly. "Do you know, Giles, it is years since you called me Minta."

"I suppose it is." The reverend's faint frown showed impatience at this frivolous interruption. "As soon as it is possible to arrange it, may I come to London and tell you what is in my mind?"

"Dear Giles, I hope you will also tell me what is in your heart." Lady Araminta directed a challenging look at her son, as if daring him to laugh. Seeing his raised eyebrows, she concluded hastily, "Yes, do come, Giles. I will be waiting for you."

The reverend, having intercepted the glance, said awkwardly, "You will not object, Jonathan?"

Sin smiled. "Not in the slightest, sir," he said reassuringly. "I think I know what you would say to my mother."

"And you do not mind, Jonathan?"

Sin shook his head. "Not a bit. My sympathies are entirely with your cause." He looked at his mother, noting with some amusement her heightened color and the agitated fluttering of her eyelashes. "Yes, sir, I repeat, my sympathies are with you, and in more ways than one."

Lady Araminta bridled. "Odious boy!" Seeing the laughter in the dark eyes regarding her, she gave a reluctant laugh. "Oh, you! Why do I always allow you to bait me?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. Perhaps you should consult with Annaliza, who, I feel sure, considers herself an expert on the subject of baiting."

"Enough!" Lady Araminta said rebukingly. "I will not allow you to further irritate Annaliza. Giles, you will pay no attention to my son. I will contrive it so that he is not present when you visit me."

The reverend, taking her seriously, shook his head firmly. "It is only fitting that he be present, Minta."

"Of course," Sin said smoothly. "It is, after all, only right. I see, Mother, you are determined to live up to your well-deserved reputation of a shameless hussy."

Lady Araminta smothered a laugh. "You must not regard him, Giles. His one ambition in life is to put me to the blush."

Annaliza, who had been listening intently, leaned toward the window. "Have you been keeping secrets from me, Father?" she asked, regarding the reverend with puzzled eyes. "What is it you have to say to Lady Araminta?"

The reverend's faint flush deepened. "I . . . I will speak to you on this matter at a later date, child."

"Yes, but—"

"Say no more for the moment, Annaliza," the reverend interrupted hastily. "I promise you, the next time you see me, that there will be no secrets between us."

Annaliza looked at him for a moment. "I think I should like to know now, Father."

"Well, you'll not, Miss Annaliza." Liberty's hand pulled Annaliza back from the window. "The very idea of making demands of your father, when it must be plain to you that he wishes to keep his silence. You young people are all the same these days, no respect for your elders."

"Why should I not know?" Annaliza's voice rose indignantly. "It would seem to me that I am the only one who has been kept in the dark. Take your hands off me, Liberty! I wish to speak to my father."

"I will do nothing of the sort, Miss Annaliza," Liberty said severely. "Had you not been so full of yourself, you would not need to be asking questions now."

"Oh, how dare you! I am not full of myself."

"Of course you are. You are no different from any other young girl. They are always thinking of themselves, and they don't give a snap of the fingers for the feelings and thoughts of others. Her ladyship was the same in her time, and so I tell you."

"Liberty, I warn you," Annaliza threatened in a choked voice. "I will not be spoken to in that way!"

"Hoightly-toightly!" Liberty gave a dry laugh. "Settle down, Miss Snip, and behave yourself. Don't forget, we have a long way to go, and if there is one thing I can't abide, it is a fit of the sullens. So we will have no long face, if you please."

"Now, Liberty," Lady Araminta said nervously. "You mean well, I know, but Miss Annaliza does not understand you as I do."

"Then she will have to learn to know me, will she not, my lady?"

Bending his head, Sin caught a glimpse of Annaliza's red and furious face. "Good old Liberty," he said, grinning. "She will always have the last word."

"Perhaps I should speak with my daughter," the reverend said hesitantly.

Sin shook his head. "Not necessary, sir. Before too many miles have passed, Annaliza will be suitably chastened. I myself suffered much in my youth from Liberty's iron rule, and now, I am happy to say, your daughter is about to experience a taste of it."

"But Annaliza is not a child, she is a young woman."

"The age matters not to our Liberty, sir. It is all one to her."

"Well, if you really think it will be all right, Jonathan. But Annaliza can be very headstrong, you know."

"Father!"

Sin's grin widened. "Ah, the voice of the indignant maiden!" He put his hand on the carriage door. "Put your head in, Mother, and let us be on our way."

"I will see you in London, Giles." With a last smile, Lady Araminta settled back against the red cushions. About to address a remark to Annaliza, she decided against it. The girl's soft lips were folded in a tight line and her sherry-colored eyes were bright with fury. With those remarkable eyes, the flush in her normally pale skin, the soft pink of the bonnet framing her piquant face, she was, Lady Sinclair decided, most attractive. Sin was right. Annaliza might not be a beauty by the accepted standards, but she had her own kind of beauty. She darted another quick look at the girl. Annaliza was by no means the milk-and-water miss she had at first thought her. She had spirit and fire, and, regrettably, on occasions such as now, an extremely hot temper. But with her rapidly changing moods, she would be a challenge to any man. Certainly she would suit Sin remarkably well, if only he could be made to see it.

Lady Sinclair's thoughts broke off as Sin entered the carriage and seated himself opposite her. Sighing, she directed a warning look at him and gave a meaningful nod of her head toward Annaliza. "Say nothing," she mouthed.

Sin chose to ignore the warning. "All will be well, Mother," he said, smiling at her. "Unless a man is a fool, he does not voluntarily enter the cage of an infuriated lioness."

"Nor does one enter the nest of the viper," Annaliza snapped. "And you, my lord, are a viper."

Liberty stirred. "Well, here's a pretty thing," she said indignantly. "I vow and declare, my lady, that I have never heard the like. I do not hesitate to say that there are times when his lordship might be likened to a viper, but it should not be said aloud. There is, after all, such a thing as respect."

"But why not?" Sin said lazily. "You yourself, Liberty, have never scrupled to speak aloud your opinion of me."

"Indeed!" Liberty drew herself up. "I hope you are not accusing me of disrespect, my lord."

Sin hid a smile. "No, Liberty. I don't think I would dare."

"Bah!" With an impatient movement Annaliza pulled off her bonnet, and her black hair, already beginning to lose its curl, tumbled about her slender shoulders in gleaming confusion. "Let me tell you something, my lord," she went on. "There are some bound by servitude to you, who are forced to keep a still tongue. I, however, am not one of these unfortunate creatures." She looked meaningfully at Liberty, who met her gaze with an indignant and outraged stare.

Sin smiled. "If you are referring to Liberty, you are very far from the mark. Liberty, I would have you know, is a tyrant. I think it a great pity that she is not bound by servitude, for if that were so, we would have a rest from her clacking, scolding tongue."

Liberty pulled her bonnet to a straighter angle. "My lord!" she protested.

"Now, Sin," Lady Sinclair said anxiously. "You must not hurt Liberty's feelings. She is, as you know, very sensitive."

Annaliza patted Lady Sinclair's hand. "Pay him no attention." She looked at Sin. "You, my lord, are a bully, and a cursed viper to boot."

"Would you really say that?" Sin asked amiably.

"I would."

"In that case, I must agree with you. I am, unfortunately, of a meek disposition, and that being so, I would do anything to keep the peace."

Trying her best to smother a sudden surge of inner laughter at this blandly spoken lie, Annaliza glared at him fiercely. "My lord," she said in a slightly unsteady voice, "you would not know meek if it struck you in the face."

Hiding his own amusement, Sin answered in a low voice, "Whatever you say, Annaliza." He leaned forward in his seat, peering at her intently. "Why are your lips quivering? Are you feeling ill?"

Taking a deep breath, Annaliza successfully crushed the threatening laughter. "I am perfectly well, thank you," she answered with an attempt at dignity. "I would be obliged, however, if you would not address me again, my lord."

"May I say one more thing?"

"Very well, if you must."

"Thank you. I merely wished to ask if you could bring yourself to call me 'Sin' rather than that stiff 'my lord.' "

Annaliza was fully aware that he was trying to provoke her, as he had done for the past few days, and she was determined not to give him the satisfaction of a further outburst of temper. "I will call you 'Sin,'" she answered coldly, meeting his dark, smiling eyes, "for it is well-suited to you. If I tried for years, I could not think of a better name to describe your odious character."

"Miss Annaliza!" Liberty exclaimed in a shocked voice. "You go too far. His lordship may be a sinful man, but it is not for you to tell him so to his face. The very idea! I am ashamed of you, Miss Annaliza."

Sin's eyes turned to Liberty. "But why should she not, Liberty? You do."

"I hope I know my place, my lord," Liberty said stiffly. "Whatever chiding I may have done has been out of affection for you and your mother."

"Ah!" Sin murmured. "So that is the reason for your tyranny. I have often wondered about that."

Liberty's lips tightened to a formidable line. "I am no tyrant, my lord, and it is unworthy of you to call me so." Her severe eyes glinted frostily in his direction. "A pretty thing it is if I, who have guided your footsteps as a baby, who have bounced you upon my knee, should now be forbidden the freedom of affectionate speech. However, if it is your lordship's desire that I remain silent, then I will oblige. I shall close my mouth and utter no further words."

With laughter still lingering in his eyes, Sin said wistfully, "You mean it, Liberty? May I rely upon that?"

"Well!" Liberty spluttered. She looked accusingly at Lady Sinclair. "Do you see, your ladyship, what comes of ignoring my advice when his lordship was young?"

Lady Sinclair raised her hand in a feeble placating gesture.

"I am sure you are right, Liberty. As for you, Sin, is it necessary to be so unkind? You know very well that Liberty has your best interests at heart." She gave him an imploring look. "Let us not quarrel among ourselves, or else my nerves will be sadly overset before we have completed a quarter of the journey."

Looking somewhat rueful, Sin nodded in agreement. "You are right, Mother. I beg your pardon, Liberty."

Liberty inclined her head stiffly. "Your lordship should think before he speaks," she said in the tone of one who upbraids a child. "However, my lord, it is my Christian duty to be forgiving, and therefore I accept your apology."

"You relieve my mind, Liberty." Sin sent a mocking smile in Annaliza's direction. "And what of you, my love? Shall we call a truce?"

Color flooded Annaliza's face at the small endearment, but she did not comment upon it. Tilting her chin haughtily, she said in a cold voice, "It is too late to apologize, for I will have none of it."

"Really? But I was not aware, sweet Annaliza, that I had apologized to you."

Annaliza's eyes sparkled angrily. "That is beside the point. But you may make your mind easy, for I have no intention of repaying Lady Sinclair's kind hospitality by quarreling with her son."

Sin bit his lip to keep back the smile provoked by this insincerity. "But from the moment you opened your eyes this morning, Annaliza, you have been doing little else."

"And whose fault is that? No, don't answer, for I know you will only utter more of your hateful sarcasm."

Sin sighed. "You see, Mother, I am doing my best to be friendly. But it would seem that Annaliza is determined to be disagreeable."

"How dare you!" Annaliza flared. "It is you, my lord, who are disagreeable, not I."

Defeated, Lady Sinclair closed her eyes. "Dear children," she murmured in a pained voice, "I am sure we will soon be very comfortable together." The carriage gave a slight lurch preparatory to departure, and she opened her eyes and sat up straight. "Giles," she called, "are you still there?"

"Here I am, my dear. I just returned to the house to fetch something I had forgotten." The reverend's smiling face appeared at the window. When he encountered his daughter's

stormy eyes, his smile faded. His face lengthening into a troubled expression, he said uncertainly, "Is all well, Minta?"

Lady Araminta patted his arm affectionately. "All is well."

"You are sure?" the reverend said, frowning. "It seems to me that the atmosphere is a little tense."

Lady Araminta gave vent to a tinkling laugh that was meant to convince. "It is nothing that need concern you, Giles. It is simply that there has been a little spirited argument. One must expect that when young people get together."

"Well, if you are certain."

"I am certain. You must not worry your head, Giles."

"Then I will not." The reverend's eyes sought his daughter once more. "I have something for you, Annaliza. A little going-away present." The reverend stooped. Straightening up, he handed a large box through the window. Annaliza took the box eagerly, and he added quickly, "Open it when you are on your way, child. We have delayed her ladyship long enough."

Nodding, Annaliza sat back, the box clutched to her. "Whatever you say, Father. I thank you for whatever is inside."

"I hope you will like it," the reverend said somewhat wistfully. "It does seem to me to be your color."

At this clue, Annaliza's eyes brightened with interest. "Sight unseen, I know that I will like it."

"Good, good. In that case, it only remains for me to wish you all a safe journey." The reverend's eyes lingered on Lady Sinclair's smiling face. "Take care of each other, and may God bless you."

"Giles, dear," Lady Sinclair said in a soft voice, "we are only going to London."

"I know, Minta. It is just that Annaliza and I have never been parted before."

"I will take care of her, Giles."

"I know you will, Minta."

"And so will I, sir," Sin said unexpectedly.

"Thank you, Jonathan. Annaliza, you must curb your impetuosity, and you must obey Lady Sinclair in all things. Promise me."

Avoiding Sin's eyes, Annaliza said quickly, "Oh, Father, of course I will. And you must not worry about me. I can take care of myself."

The reverend sighed. "I have not noticed it in the past."

His mournful air lifting, he smiled at Annaliza. "There is a bright spot, for I hope to see you very soon, child."

Annaliza returned the smile. "I'm glad. I shall be looking forward to it. And please practice what you preach, for I shall be worried about you, too. Good-bye for now, Father."

Scowling, Manford watched the bustle of departure. In his hiding place, he felt cramped and cold, and his desire to be even with Lord Sinclair and Annaliza rose to a new height. He turned his brooding eyes to the reverend, who was watching the carriage out of sight. "You should have gone with them, old man," he muttered beneath his breath. "For if I have my way, you'll not be seeing that girl of yours again."

His eyes misty, the reverend swallowed a lump in his throat as the carriage turned into the lane and was lost from view. It was a good thing, he thought, that Jonathan had managed to locate a suitable vehicle for the return journey. The barouche in which they had arrived was, for the moment, useless. Because it was too wide for the narrow lane, a wheel had broken when Carrington had tried to force an entry. Carrington, apparently, had been lax in his duty, for he had only recently taken the barouche to the wheelwright, and it was still in the process of being repaired. According to the workman engaged on the repair, the wheel was not of the common type, and a new one had to be built. "But what will you do about the barouche?" the reverend had asked Lord Sinclair. "You cannot just leave it here."

"Nor will I," Sin had answered, smiling at him. "By the time you are ready to make your visit to London, the repairs will be completed. The barouche, you will admit, will be more comfortable for you than a public transport."

His face flushing with pleasure, the reverend had nevertheless ventured a protest. "It is kind of you, Jonathan, but I would not dream of imposing on you."

"But you are doing nothing of the sort. How else would I get the barouche to London? It is all settled, sir. Nugent will drive you, for I am told by my mother that he is pining for a glimpse of London."

And so it had been settled between them. The reverend, wishing he were on the road with them now, brushed a hand across his eyes; then, deplored his excessive sentimentality at this first parting from Annaliza, to say nothing of his regret that Lady Araminta was no longer in his house to delight him with her gay laughter, her frivolous chatter, her provocative perfume, and the soft, lingering glances from her still-youth-

ful blue eyes, he turned about and walked up the short path to the house. Entering, he called to Ellen to bring coffee to his study, and then closed the door firmly behind him.

Manford glared at the closed door. He had always hated the Reverend Sedgewick, with his pious, mealy-mouthed ways. Almost he was tempted to confront the old man and shatter his damnable smugness by telling him of his daughter's secret activities over the past few months. He might even tell him of his own future plans for Annaliza's complete destruction. He hesitated; then, crushing down the temptation, he emerged from his hiding place. His shoulders hunched against the cutting wind, his head lowered to combat its driving force, he walked swiftly away. A cynical smile curved his lips. It would not do to be too impulsive. For the moment his comings and goings must, of necessity, be secretive, but soon there would be no further need for such cautious behavior on his part. Sinclair, as he had anticipated, had shaken the dust of Cornwall from his elegantly shod feet. What his satirical lordship's future plans might be, he could only guess at, but he did know that he had not lodged a formal complaint against his abductor. That being so, the tentative hue and cry made by the administrators of justice would speedily die. Things would be back to normal, with business as usual. This, of course, was only on the part of those men of the law who worked on land. The revenuers, with their fast sloops and their avowed hatred of the smugglers, were another matter. Manford's mind turned to Annaliza, and he felt the stirring of his simmering hatred. He had put her out of his life, for his boredom with her had won out over expediency, but he was by no means finished with her, as she would find out. Within a week or two, his newly revived affairs permitting, he would arrive in London. Once there, God help Sinclair and Annaliza Sedgewick. This last thought amused him. He himself did not believe in God, he could not remember ever saying a prayer, but he presumed that Annaliza believed. Sinclair? Behind that cool, sarcastic manner of his, perhaps even he had faith. Well, they would need God's intervention against the vengeance he had planned, so it was as well if they had faith.

Manford's amusement vanished. His smiling lips hardened and the hot blood of fury surged into his wind-stung face. Annaliza, that pale, uninteresting imitation of a woman, had actually dared to turn against him, to try to deceive him. And Sinclair, who, apart from his noble birth, was obviously a

government spy, had tried to infiltrate his operation. But he had been too clever for Sinclair. Yes, they had dared to do that to him, Richard Manford! It was heresy of the highest order, and it was only right that they be punished in the manner he thought most fitting. He had appointed himself a one-man court. He had tried and judged them, and he would shortly be carrying out the sentence. Everything was as it should be.

The wind rose to a new fury, blowing his blond hair to a wilder disarray, as Manford reached the roughly hewn cliff steps that led down to the sea, but he was oblivious of the added discomfort. Descending, his booted feet careful on the crumbling, slippery steps, he was filled with an immense self-satisfaction as he reached the water's edge. All other thoughts were temporarily swept away. The sea, the magnificent, beautiful sea! It was the only thing that was more powerful, more frightening, more awe-inspiring than Richard Manford. He thrilled to it, he loved and respected that roaring fury as he could never love and respect a puny human being.

Sin braced his back against the jolting of the badly sprung carriage, his half-closed eyes unconsciously tender as he watched Annaliza posing in the almond-pink cloak. The reverend was right, he thought, the delicate color did suit her.

Annaliza hastily removed the cloak as a lurch of the carriage almost threw her from her feet. Sitting down, the cloak across her knees, she lovingly stroked the soft velvet folds. "I should put it back in the box, Miss Annaliza," Liberty said. "You don't want to soil it."

"In a moment, Liberty. I just want to look at it a while longer."

Lady Sinclair glanced at the girl's down-bent head. There was something so clean and nice and unspoiled about Annaliza, she thought. She had qualities that were rarely seen in these decadent days, and it was to be hoped that the stresses and strains of modern life would not spoil her. Not that she expected the girl to change. Annaliza was all of the things she had enumerated, and hers was also a strong character. Lady Sinclair looked down at the stroking hand. The reverend's going-away gift to his daughter was undoubtedly attractive to look at, and it was a great pity that the material was of such poor quality, for it would not wear well. No doubt, she thought with a pang of sympathy, it was the best Giles had been able to afford, and even that expenditure had prob-

ably strained his limited income to the utmost. Annaliza, however, who was obviously not a judge of material, saw no fault in it. To her the cloak was sumptuous, and that, Lady Sinclair thought firmly, was all that really mattered. Giles, dear man that he was, had meant to give his daughter pleasure, and he had succeeded. As Annaliza's eyes turned to her, she said with gentle warmth, "It's lovely, dear, and you look beautiful in it. It's obvious to me that your father has very good taste."

Delighted with this compliment to her father, Annaliza nodded eagerly. "Yes," she confided, "he has always had a flair that way. I remember that my mother would not dream of choosing clothes or having anything made up without asking my father's opinion."

"I'm not surprised to hear it." It was true, Lady Araminta thought. Giles might be hampered by his means, but there was no doubt that he had unerring taste.

Annaliza looked down at the shimmering velvet pool on her lap. "I think that my father must have spent a great deal of money on me. Too much," she said, a frown fretting her smooth forehead. "I would not like to think he has left himself without. Do you think that is what he has done, Lady Araminta?"

"No, child," Lady Araminta comforted her, "I don't think so for a moment."

"A fool and his money are soon parted," Liberty put in in an austere voice.

"Be quiet, Liberty!"

"Yes, my lady." Liberty sniffed. "But I am entitled to my own thoughts."

"Possibly. But you will keep them to yourself."

"Very well, my lady."

Lady Araminta's attention returned to Annaliza. "You must not brood about expense, dear. Just enjoy your father's gift, as he would want you to do."

Annaliza's face brightened immediately. "I daresay I am worrying unduly. You are right, Lady Araminta. I will enjoy it, I can promise you that. It is, after all, the first really beautiful thing I have owned." She touched the hood with the tip of her finger. "Fur, as well as velvet. Imagine! What kind of fur do you think it is, Lady Araminta?"

Lady Araminta studied the wide band of white fur edging the pink hood. Rabbit probably, she thought. Aloud she said, "I'm not really certain, dear. I have never been clever about

furs. But it is certainly very lush, and the white against the black of your hair is quite bewitching."

Annaliza looked at her uncertainly. She had never held a great opinion of her looks, and she was not sure how to take this extravagant compliment. Deciding after a thoughtful moment that Lady Araminta was sincere, she said with impulsive generosity, "You may borrow the cloak anytime you wish."

Lady Araminta was touched. "Why, thank you, my dear. But the thing is that although the style is perfect for you, it is much too youthful for me."

"Oh." Annaliza struggled with a sense of relief that her offer had been turned down. "Well, you know best." She frowned faintly. "Perhaps I should not wear it too often myself. It is much too expensive, and the material is so delicate that it would soil easily."

Lady Araminta patted her hand. "That is something that need not concern you. Liberty has a marvelous method for cleaning delicate fabrics."

"That's wonderful to know." Annaliza turned to the maid. "And how do you like my new cloak, Liberty?"

"Very nice, Miss Annaliza. It suits you well, as I am sure you are aware." Liberty looked grimly at the pink velvet. "However, I would be failing in my duty if I did not point out to you that vanity is a sin. I think it best that you remember that."

Taken aback, Annaliza stared at her for an incredulous moment. "Really, Liberty!" she said at last. "You are certainly outspoken, to say the least."

Liberty nodded. "Always have been, Miss Annaliza. Speak the truth and shame the devil, that has always been my policy."

"I see." Unable to hold on to her sense of outrage, Annaliza laughed rather helplessly. What was the good of being angry with the woman? Liberty was unique, and it was certain that she would not change at her time of life. "I suppose it is a good policy to live by. But in my case, Liberty, although I have many sins, vanity is not one of them."

Unimpressed, Liberty shrugged her narrow shoulders. "Melton told me the very same thing about himself. 'I have not a smidgen of vanity, Liberty,' that is what he said to me. To me, Miss Annaliza, who can read the old fool like a book. Did you ever hear the like?"

Knowing that if their eyes met she would be undone,

Annaliza studiously avoided looking at Sin or Lady Aramina. "And what did you say to that, Liberty?" she asked in a creditably steady voice.

Liberty snorted. "There was only one reply I could make to such nonsense. I said, 'Think not to deceive me, Melton, for it won't wash. You are an old rogue, and you fairly wallow in vanity and sin. If you can't see that for yourself, I will land you a clout round the ear that will make you see the light.' "

"Poor Melton!"

Liberty looked at her keenly. "Are you laughing at me, Miss Annaliza?"

"Of course not, Liberty. Would I do a thing like that?"

"I think perhaps you might, Miss Annaliza."

A stifled sound from Sin caused Annaliza to bite hard on her lip. "I . . . I am not laughing at you, Liberty. Truly not." Meeting the woman's eyes, she went on hastily, "You . . . you have not changed your mind about Melton, have you? You do love him? After all, he cannot be all bad."

"He has his moments, rare though they are," Liberty conceded reluctantly. "As to the state of my feelings, I will tell Melton nothing until I am satisfied that he has reformed. And that goes for anyone else who might inquire."

"I'm sorry, Liberty. I did not mean to pry."

Liberty nodded graciously. "That is all right, Miss Annaliza." She stretched out a commanding hand. "Now, then, give me that pink nonsense. I will pack it away in the box, for I feel sure you would not want the dust of the road settling on it."

"Would you like to know what I think of you in your new cloak, Annaliza?" Sin said softly as she reluctantly surrendered her new treasure to Liberty.

Annaliza hesitated. "If you wish to tell me, my lord." Her voice was cold, but her eyes between the long, dark lashes were anxious as she awaited his verdict.

Sin smiled at her. "'My lord' again. I thought it was to be 'Sin.' "

Annaliza flushed, wishing that it were possible to control her heartbeat where this man was concerned. It was racing now, she thought in annoyance as she met his eyes. "Sin, then," she said in a low voice, "if you will have it so."

"I will most certainly have it so."

Annaliza nodded with what she hoped was indifference.

Then, catching Lady Araminta's hopeful, encouraging smile, she said stiltedly, "Very well, Sin. Say what you have to say."

Sin surveyed her thoughtfully, and to Annaliza's inflamed imagination those dark eyes of his seemed to caress her. "I think," Sin began in the same soft voice, "that if one could endow the spring season with a face and a form, it would look exactly like you. Fragile, exquisite spring, a slight figure wrapped in an almond-pink cloak. Even tired old winter would brighten at the sight. Yes, Annaliza, that is how you look to me in your new cloak."

Annaliza was conscious of a traitorous glow of pleasure, but for the moment she could find nothing to say; neither, it seemed, could she drag her eyes away from his. Feeling the hope that she had believed dead stirring to new and vigorous life, she wondered frantically why he was doing this to her. Her hand went to her throat, her fingers stroking the soft flesh in a nervous gesture. She must not hope, she told herself. Must not! He had made it plain enough that she meant nothing to him. She would be a fool indeed if she allowed him to wheedle her with a few honeyed, poetic words. Why, if she should take him seriously, he would laugh at her, and she would die of her anguish and humiliation. Blinking, she averted her eyes, and then said in a clear, cold voice, "Really, Sin! If that is how you normally speak to the women of your acquaintance, it is small wonder that they fall all over themselves for your favors."

"Thank you for the compliment. But as far as I can recall, I have never spoken to a woman in just that way."

Annaliza laughed, but there was no amusement in the sound. "I am not such a fool as to believe that. I do have a few brains in my head, and I will not allow myself to be beguiled by you."

Abruptly Sin lost his temper. "Little fool! You flatter yourself unduly."

"Do I indeed! You forget, do you not, Sin, that I have some knowledge of your methods with women?"

Knowing that she was trying to remind him of the episode at the inn, an episode he would always regret, Sin drew his face into a mask of cold reserve. "With women, you say? But you are not a woman, you are a child."

Tears stung Annaliza's eyes at the biting scorn in his voice. "You did not think so once," she said in a choked voice.

"Perhaps I would not think so now, if you were to act your age."

"How dare you!"

The moment the words left his mouth, Sin had regretted them. He wanted to tell her that he had not meant to hurt her, but he could not bring himself to do it. Instead, he frowned formidably and said in a cold voice, "I beg your pardon. That remark was not necessary."

"It was not!" Annaliza retorted with a flare of spirit. "You are cruel and unkind and hatefully sarcastic. That is my opinion of you, and it will never deviate."

"Now, now!" Lady Araminta chided. She looked at Annaliza. "He did not mean it, dear. And I know he meant every word of that very nice compliment he paid you."

"Enough, Mother!" Sin said curtly. "I do not need you to apologize for me. You must let the chit believe as she pleases, for it is plain that nothing else will satisfy her." Encountering Annaliza's hot, angry eyes, and driven on by something he did not understand, he smiled unpleasantly. "Annaliza's opinion of me, as she would be the first to tell you, is of small moment."

"Yes, dear, if you say so," Lady Araminta said in a subdued voice. "But do try to control your anger, Sin, for I wish all to be pleasant between us."

"Really, Mother, how your imagination runs away with you," Sin said impatiently. "Do you honestly believe that I am angry?"

Lady Araminta peered at him uncertainly. "It did seem to me to be so, Sin."

"Well, I am not. If you want the truth, I am confoundedly tired, and more than a little bored with this interminable journey."

"I understand, dear." Lady Araminta glanced at Liberty. The maid was sitting bolt upright, her eyes closed, her head nodding with the movement of the carriage. "Liberty is asleep," she said, smiling. "It is not to be wondered at, I suppose, for I have never yet found anything that could keep her awake. Why don't you try to follow her example, Sin? If you can sleep, the journey will pass swiftly enough."

Sin smothered a spasm of irritation. His mother was up to something. In all her moods, and they were many and varied, she had never before attempted to speak to him as if he were a naughty child who must be smoothed into good humor. Was she, perhaps, hoping to show him in a more favorable light to Annaliza? If so, she was wasting her time. Annaliza, it was true, had looked after him in his time of need, and he

had been grateful to her. While she herself was recovering from the shock of all she had undergone, culminating with Selwyn's attack, he had tried his best to rally her spirit. He had shown his gratitude for her care in small ways, laughing with her, waiting on her, soothing her nighttime fears, talking with her, and smoothing out, he had hoped, those things that still weighed heavily on her mind. When she had recovered, there had been a softness in her eyes when she regarded him, and he had understood that there was an opening for friendship and a new understanding between them. Why, then, had he, driven on by his private demons in regard to this particular girl, effectively blocked that opening? The result was that the softness had vanished from Annaliza's eyes, giving place to hatred. Surprised by the pain this thought brought, he scowled at his mother and said abruptly, "I think I will try to sleep. Anything to alleviate this monotony."

Daunted by the scowl, and wondering what she could possibly have said to have earned it, Lady Araminta said quickly, "I should, dear. It's a very good idea."

Settling himself more comfortably, Sin folded his arms and closed his eyes. Reflecting on how he had denied his anger to his mother, he found himself grimly amused. Of course he was angry, devastatingly and most unreasonably angry, and with a chit of a girl who meant nothing to him.

Sin opened his eyes a slit and looked at Annaliza. She was sitting upright, her head bent. Her mouth, he thought, looked sad, as though whatever occupied her mind was not pleasant. She looked up at that moment, and he hastily closed his eyes and returned to his thoughts. It was strange that he, who never before had allowed himself to become ruffled by any turn of event, no matter how momentous, should spend most of his time brooding on Annaliza Sedgewick, a flighty chit scarce out of the nursery. He would find himself listening for the sound of her voice, her quick footsteps. He would watch for her smile, for the changing expressions in her expressive eyes. Beautiful eyes that were so often dark with anger against him, her tormentor.

Sin's lips tightened. He did not understand himself these days—that much was becoming increasingly clear. At one moment he wanted to hurt Annaliza, and the next moment he wanted to kiss that full, sullen mouth and force an admission from her that she was not indifferent to him. There were only two solutions to this strange battle he fought within him-

self. Either he was the monster of conceit that Annaliza believed him to be, or else he was in love with the damned girl.

At this last thought, Sin drew in his breath sharply. No! It must not be. He could not allow it to happen to him. He had seen too many of his friends surrender to the sweet emotion, only to be left with shattered hopes and broken lives. Only last year, for instance, Kent Barlow had blown his brains out over a woman. It was true that the woman had been worthless, but all the same, it did not do for a man to place himself in such a weak position. When he himself married, Sin thought grimly, which he must do if he hoped to have an heir to carry on the name, it would be a question of expediency. That way, if anything happened to the marriage, there would be no hurt involved. Selfish? Cowardly? Yes, obviously. But he did not intend to put his life in the hands of a female and have her play with it as she willed.

Unaware of the thoughts passing through Sin's mind, Annaliza stared out of the window at the passing countryside. After a long while those winter-seared fields and shriveled, leafless hedgerows would give place to small villages, to towns, and then, finally, to the gray city streets that heralded London. She would be there, living in the home of her love, her torment! Annaliza's small pink-gloved hands clenched on her lap. Yes, Sin was her love. She could deny it all she wished, she could go on practicing her great deception, telling herself over and over how much she hated him, but the simple and undeniable truth was that no matter how unkind Sin was to her, no matter how he cut at her with his sarcasm, she could not stop loving him. Sarcasm, wounding remarks—Sin was surely a master at the art. And yet, when he had recovered from his experience at Selwyn's cottage, he had been so kind to her, so very tender, that she had not been able to help hoping that he loved her in return. Then what had changed him? Had he seen her love for him looking from her eyes, and had that unwanted love so embarrassed him that he had set to work to turn her feeling for him to hatred?

Annaliza's back stiffened. Of course! She had been a fool not to see it before this. There was no other possible explanation for the dramatic and seemingly overnight change in him. Now that she understood, Sin need no longer fear embarrassment. She would show him hatred when he provoked it, and indifference when he did not, but never, never again would she show him love!

Her eyes misting with tears of hurt and anger, Annaliza looked across at Sin. Evidently his conscience was quite untroubled by someone as insignificant as herself, for he appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Well, what else had she expected? It was wishful thinking to imagine he might be suffering the same pangs as she. She was nothing to him. Indeed, except for those times when his tongue lashed at her in derision or mockery, it was doubtful if he ever gave her a thought. As she gazed hungrily at Sin, Annaliza experienced one of those small aberrations of the mind that can sometimes come so unexpectedly. Instead of Sin's face, she saw Richard Manford's.

Shuddering, Annaliza tried to force herself to relax. Richard of the blond hair, the boyish smile, and the guileless blue eyes. Richard, who had deceived her, who had hidden cruelty, treachery, and outright evil behind a smiling, genial mask. She had practically grown up with Richard. On those times when his father, now dead, had sent him away to a school in London, she had missed him sorely, and had counted the days until he would return for his vacation. She had believed that she was familiar with every aspect of Richard's character, which made it the more frightening to realize that she had never known him at all.

A premonition came to Annaliza then, and she clasped her suddenly shaking hands tightly together. Richard had not done with her, or with Sin; she would stake her life on it. She thought of the threats made against her father, and her heart leaped with panic. Would Richard revenge himself by harming her father? She should not be in this carriage, on her way to London. She should be with her father, waiting for the moment she was certain would come.

"What is it, Annaliza?" Lady Araminta's hand touched Annaliza's knee. "Why are you breathing so rapidly? Are you agitated about something?"

Annaliza looked at her, her fear showing in her eyes. "My father!" she gasped.

"What about him, dear?"

"I . . . I should not have left him alone. I'm afraid that Richard might try to harm him."

"Richard?" Lady Araminta's delicate brows drew together uneasily.

"Yes, yes," Annaliza said impatiently. "Richard Manford."

Lady Araminta's face flushed. "That man! I'm sorry, An-

naliza, I did not connect the two. You really think Giles will be in danger from him?"

"Yes, I do." Annaliza wrung her hands together. "Could you possibly drop me off at the next coaching stop? I am going back to him."

"We will all go." Thoroughly alarmed, Lady Araminta rose to her feet. "I will tell Carrington to turn the carriage about."

Sin opened his eyes. "Sit down, Mother." Then, as Lady Araminta complied, he looked at Annaliza. "You may both calm yourselves," his drawling voice went on. "Annaliza, do you really suppose I would have gone off uncaring, and left your father to the mercy of Manford and his gang of toughs?"

Annaliza shook her head in bewilderment. "I had supposed, that you, as I, hadn't given the matter a thought."

"On the contrary. I gave it a great deal of thought."

"But the fact remains that my father is still alone. He abhors violence, and he will make no move to defend himself. He is not a coward, you understand, but he will not lift his hand in anger to another."

"I know, Annaliza." Sin's answering voice was gentle. "But when the good and the meek will not defend themselves, it must be done for them. Your father is not really alone, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"There is Nugent, your father's gardener, who stands ready to repel the enemy."

"Nugent? What has he to do with anything?"

"A great deal." Sin smiled. "I did not spend my convalescence doing nothing else but lounging about the house. I had several quite interesting conversations with Nugent. I found out, for instance, that he is not only an ex-coachman, but also an ex-soldier. Further to that, he still owns a pistol. A crack shot in his time, was Nugent."

"Nugent!"

"Yes, surprising, isn't it? You would not think it to look at him, but it's true. Nugent is quite a man, and he is very fond of your father. He won't see anything happen to him, I assure you."

"But . . . but Nugent is just one man. He has to sleep sometime."

Sin sighed. "What an ungrateful wench you are."

"I'm not. I'm very grateful for your thought for my father. Nevertheless, Nugent, as I said, does have to sleep."

Sin nodded. "Very true. I had the same concern. When I voiced this to Nugent, he led me to four other men, also ex-soldiers. He assured me that I could, as he put it, trust them till hell froze over. These men will take turns guarding the house, and all of them will be armed. It will be done discreetly, of course. By that I mean that they will not be in evidence to alert Manford or to distress your father in any way, but one or the other will always be there. Feel better now?"

"Yes, I do. I . . . I don't know how to thank you."

"I don't want thanks. But if you insist on it anyway, you may thank me by having a happy and carefree time in London."

Annaliza clasped and unclasped her hands. Would she ever understand this man she loved? It was humbling to reflect that he, whom she had labeled cold and arrogant and uncaring, had had more thought for her father than she herself. "Did . . . did it cost you a great deal of money to hire them?" she asked, and did not realize that her all-consuming love for him was reflected in her voice.

"No, Annaliza, so you may tell your pride to go back to sleep. Nugent and his friends asked nothing of me. I offered to pay them, of course, but they would not hear of it. Then, more as a concession to me, they said I might, if it pleased me, make a contribution to the Old Soldiers' Home in Chelsea. And that is exactly what I shall do when I reach London."

Lady Araminta beamed happily as Annaliza, apparently forgetful of her animosity, leaned forward in eager discussion with Sin. It was all going very well indeed. But as she suddenly remembered all that had gone before, her heart sank just a little. Nevertheless, she rallied herself sternly, there was hope yet for these two stubborn young people. It was true that Sin was not as youthful as Annaliza, for he was in his late twenties, but he could not go on as he had been doing. He needed a wife, and if that wife should turn out to be Annaliza, she would be well content.



Annaliza stood stiffly, her aching arms extended outward. Tiring of studying the various pictures decorating the walls of the white-and-gold bedroom, she turned her attention to the big white urn that stood between the large double windows. Having ascertained that the urn held approximately four dozen shaggy-headed chrysanthemums in tones shading from tawny to palest pink, she shifted her feet impatiently and addressed the gray-haired dressmaker's assistant who was kneeling at her feet. "Grace, I know that it is important that the gown hang exactly right, but my arms are aching abominably. Do you suppose I dare put them down now?"

Grace started out of her absorption with the hem. "Oh, miss!" She looked up, her sallow, lined face dismayed. "I'm so sorry. I had meant to tell you to lower your arms. Oh, dear! You must have been so uncomfortable."

Her impatience dying at the look on the woman's face, Annaliza said gently, "It's all right, Grace. There's no harm done."

"That's kind of you, Miss Annaliza," Grace said in a low voice. "But if Madame Blanche knew that I had been so careless of your comfort, she would not like it at all."

"A little thing like that, Grace? I am sure she would not regard it."

"Oh, but she would, Miss Annaliza. You are a friend of Lady Sinclair's, and Madame Blanche considers Lady Sinclair one of her most important customers." Grace's nervous fingers twitched at the hem of the yellow satin skirt she had been pinning. "I would be indebted to you, Miss Annaliza, if you would not mention this incident." She looked up again. "I wouldn't ask, but I rely on the money I earn."

"Grace!" Her crusading spirit stirring, Annaliza's voice

rose indignantly. "Do you mean to tell me that Madame Blanche would dismiss you for something so trifling?"

Grace's faded blue eyes darkened with apprehension. "She might," she said reluctantly. "Madame can be hot-tempered at times."

"Well!" Annaliza stooped to pat the woman's shoulder. "I see now that my first impression of Madame Blanche was wrong. Quite obviously she is not the warm and charming person I thought her to be. If she could dismiss you for such a small thing, then she must be a detestable woman."

Feeling that she had perhaps been too outspoken, for after all, one never quite knew how to take quality folk, Grace gave an uneasy laugh. "I . . . I did not mean to give you the wrong impression, Miss Annaliza. Madame is often very kind, you must believe that. It's simply that she can't abide complaints from a valued customer. You understand?"

Annaliza's sympathies were all with the wizened little dressmaker's assistant. Since she had been in London, Annaliza had noted what she considered to be the injustices that were visited upon the working class. She would like to have expounded on that subject now, but she quickly changed her mind when she saw the fear in the woman's eyes. "You must make your mind easy, Grace," she said softly. "Madame Blanche will hear nothing from me or from Lady Sinclair."

"Thank you, Miss Annaliza, I do appreciate it!" With a long sigh of relief, Grace once more addressed herself to her task.

Unconsciously, Annaliza echoed the sigh. It seemed to her, in the month that she had been a guest in this luxurious home on Sloane Place, that she had done little else but stand rigidly while expensive materials were draped and pinned on her reluctant form. With four dressmakers, apparently working round the clock in their zeal to please Lady Sinclair, she was already the recipient of walking costumes, afternoon gowns, evening gowns, and ball dresses. Then one day, her pride finally rebelling, she had sought out Lady Araminta. Running her to earth in her small sitting room, Annaliza had begun abruptly, "Lady Araminta, I would not for the world have you think that I do not appreciate your generosity, but it cannot go on. I do not wish you to spend a fortune on me, as you have been doing."

Lady Araminta had been genuinely amused. "I do appreciate your thought for me, Annaliza. But truly, there is no need for concern."

Refusing to be deflected, Annaliza said firmly, "Yet I am concerned. I would not have you ruin yourself on my account."

"Annaliza!" Lady Araminta gave a trill of laughter. "What a dear, funny little creature you are."

"I am not a funny little creature," Annaliza had retorted with a flash of temper. "I am a person of pride and independence, and you, Lady Araminta, kind and generous though your intentions are, are making things very difficult for me. I repeat, you must not spend your money on me."

"I have lots of money, Annaliza. More than I can spend in my lifetime."

"That is beside the point, Lady Araminta. I have clothes of my own, for I brought plenty with me, and I would just as soon wear them."

Lady Araminta's amusement had given way to bewilderment. "I don't understand you, Annaliza. Don't you like to own beautiful clothes?"

"Of course I do," Annaliza answered impatiently. "What normal female would not? But I simply cannot let you do so much for me."

"That is all very well to say, Annaliza, but you must realize that your clothes are not suitable for the winter season." With Annaliza's steady gaze upon her, Lady Araminta reddened slightly, but embarrassment notwithstanding, she had continued in a firm voice, "Your things are very nice, Annaliza, very serviceable, and I hope you will forgive me if I tell you that they are not quite—"

"Not quite fashionable enough," Annaliza interrupted. "Yes, Lady Araminta, I know that for myself, but at least I can say that they are mine."

"And you may say that about the garments that have been made up for you, and those in the process of being made, so don't be difficult, dear. You know very well that it gives me great pleasure to dress you."

"Try to understand, please," Annaliza persisted. "I feel strange about accepting such expensive gifts, and so many of them. Clothes, bonnets, shoes, walking boots, undergarments, a solid silver hairbrush, to say nothing of other costly little trifles."

"How you do harp on money and the cost of things," Lady Araminta murmured plaintively.

Annaliza's exasperation overcame her. "I am not like you, Lady Araminta," she cried. "I have been brought up to count

the cost of everything, and to harbor pennies against a rainy day. But I am not mean, if that is what you are thinking."

"I am thinking no such thing," Lady Araminta defended herself. "You have had to be careful for your father's sake, I know. But now you are here with me, and it is time to relax and enjoy yourself."

Annaliza shook her head. "It simply can't go on, Lady Araminta. I will accept one gown, if it will please you, but you must allow me to return the rest to you."

"No, Annaliza!" Lady Araminta's voice rose in shock. "Certainly not. They are all for you, with my love."

Annaliza bit her lip. "But don't you see my position? It is partly my fault, I know, I should have put a stop to it long before this. My only excuse is that I was overwhelmed. But now that I have come to my senses, I simply cannot let myself become so beholden to you."

"Beholden! You can say that to me!" Tears welled into Lady Araminta's eyes. "You are cruel, Annaliza. I don't understand how you can say that to me and still call yourself my friend."

"But of course I am your friend. You know quite well that I am very fond of you."

With a heartrending sigh Lady Araminta applied a lace-trimmed handkerchief to her eyes. "Even though it does seem a strange way for a friend to go on," she said in tremulous accents, "I suppose I must take your word for it."

Always embarrassed by the tears of others, Annaliza stared at her appalled. She had the helpless feeling that she was being manipulated, but she was unable to think of a way to combat it. She was misjudging Lady Araminta, she told herself, falling back on self-recrimination. She had meant her protest for the best, but she had been too outspoken, too tactless, too ungracious. It was no wonder that she had reduced the sensitive Lady Araminta to tears. "Please don't cry!" she blurted desperately. Searching around for other words that would soothe and heal, she finally gave up the effort. Diplomacy was, in any case, beyond her. Instead, she said with genuine warmth, "You know that we are the best of friends, and will remain so. But the thing is, one friend must not impose upon another."

Brightening at what she believed to be a partial capitulation, Lady Araminta patted her immaculate hair and sat up straight. The handkerchief disappearing into her pocket, she turned earnest but perfectly dry eyes on Annaliza. "Never

think you are imposing, dear Annaliza. But what you are doing at this moment is spoiling things for me." She sighed again, and then smiled wistfully. "Perhaps you will not fully understand this, but you have become like a daughter to me, and that being the case, it gives me the greatest pleasure to dress you up." Her sad eyes lingering on Annaliza, she paused for an effective moment. "Surely, Annaliza, you cannot bring yourself to deny me that pleasure?"

Wavering at this blatant if unspoken plea to her better nature, Annaliza said uncertainly, "I . . . I don't know what to say. If only you would not give me so much."

Lady Araminta brushed this aside. "The white ball gown was the last, was it not?"

Annaliza nodded. "Yes, the white gown is finished. A messenger brought it this morning."

"Then all that remains is for you to be fitted for the yellow satin. A beautiful shade of yellow, don't you think? So very delicate."

"Lady Araminta!"

"Really, Annaliza! There is no need to snap my head off." Seeing the danger signals in Annaliza's eyes, she added hastily, "After the yellow satin is completed, we will give it a rest for a while. Will that please you?"

"Very much. And we will give it a rest permanently."

"Now, Annaliza, you are spoiling my fun again."

"I don't mean to, you know that. Another thing, I know my father would not approve. He will say that you are spoiling me."

"Will he?" Lady Araminta laughed softly, and then said with a faint air of triumph, "But in this instance, Giles can have nothing to say. High-principled though he undoubtedly is, he cannot object to my dressing my daughter."

"But the thing is," Annaliza pointed out, "I am not your daughter."

"Not yet, perhaps. But in the future, who knows?"

"In the future?" Annaliza's eyes widened. "What are you trying to tell me?"

Lady Araminta blushed deeply. "Giles and I . . ." Under Annaliza's unwavering stare, she broke off in some confusion. Recovering herself almost at once, she added quickly, "You must not press me, Annaliza, for I will tell you no more. It is for your father to do."

Light dawned on Annaliza. So after all, Liberty had been right about her. She had been too full of herself to notice

what was going on under her very nose. But her father and Lady Araminta! Was there ever a more unlikely pair? Conquering a desire to laugh, she said in a wondering voice, "So that is what all the mysterious talk was about. But how stupid of me not to have reasoned it out for myself!" With an impulsive gesture she threw her arms about Lady Araminta and hugged her close. "I'm so glad for you both! My father has often been very lonely."

Lady Araminta extracted herself from Annaliza's arms. "You must remember, Annaliza, dear, that I have told you nothing."

"I understand." Annaliza's grin was wide and delighted. "But for what you have not told me, may I repeat that I am very glad."

"Then you will make no further objection to my dressing you?"

Annaliza shrugged. "I still feel I should object, and I will if you continue to give me so much. But perhaps, under these special circumstances, it behooves me to give in gracefully."

"I'm glad, dear."

Annaliza made a wry face. "Then I am glad I have made you glad. Nevertheless, you must keep it in mind that the yellow satin is to be the last. I am only one person, and I cannot possibly wear so many gowns in one season."

"Nonsense, dear, of course you can. It is important to maintain a fashionable reputation, you know."

Annaliza waved an impatient hand. "For you perhaps, but not for me. I care nothing for that sort of thing. But to get back to what I was saying. Enough is enough. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Lady Araminta answered in a faint voice. Taking heart again, she added eagerly, "Annaliza, I have the very thing to go with your white ball gown. With Sin as your escort, you will want to look radiant, will you not?"

Annaliza's brows rose. "I would want to look my best for any man, but not for Lord Sinclair in particular."

"Well, you know what I mean, dear. And pray don't call him Lord Sinclair. It sounds so unfriendly."

"I feel unfriendly whenever I think of him," Annaliza said in a hard voice. "After all, you will agree that he has not made the slightest effort to set me at my ease. Whenever he sees me coming, he leaves the room at once. How do you think that makes me feel?"

"I know, dear," Lady Araminta murmured defensively, "but it is just his way. He means nothing by it."

"He means nothing by it, when he always acts as though he cannot bear the sight of me?"

"Well, dear, he always bows very politely to you."

"How nice of him!" Relenting at the sight of Lady Araminta's troubled face, she said, "I wonder what it is you would have me wear with the white gown? Let me see if I can guess." She pursed her lips considerably. "A rope of emeralds, a pair of solid gold shoes with diamond buckles, a cloak made entirely of peacock feathers, or perhaps something insignificant, like the crown jewels? Am I getting warm?"

"Don't be sarcastic, Annaliza," Lady Araminta reproached her. "It does not become you. For a moment there, you know, you sounded very like dear Sin."

Annaliza's smile died. "I'm sorry, Lady Araminta. But look, won't you tell me what it is you would have me wear? Go on, please, I can't bear the suspense."

Lady Araminta nodded. "I simply want you to wear my pearls. They will complete the outfit beautifully."

"Your pearls!" Annaliza almost shouted the words. "You must know that I could not possibly do that."

"Really, dear, I don't see why not."

"You know very well why not," Annaliza cried. "You yourself told me the history of those pearls. Don't you remember?"

"Not yet being in my dotage, naturally I remember," Lady Araminta replied somewhat tartly. "So that you will be sure I'm not wandering, I will repeat the story. The pearls were presented by Henry VIII to the Sinclair lady of that time. Her name was Maria Anne, and she was accounted to be a great beauty." Her annoyance abating, Lady Araminta laughed softly. "You may be sure that her beauty was not lost on that old scoundrel Henry, or he wouldn't have bestowed upon her such a priceless mark of his royal favor. If history is to be believed, Maria Anne was one of the few ladies who managed to evade the king's amorous pursuit and still keep her head upon her shoulders, to say nothing of managing to remain in possession of the Tudor pearls. Maria Anne was, apparently, a very clever lady who kept one step ahead of the king at all times. Until the day she died, she remained faithful to her husband, Adam Sinclair."

"Lord Adam Sinclair," Annaliza murmured. "I was studying his portrait only this morning. It is no wonder to me that Maria Anne loved him so much. He looks so strong, so handsome, so very exciting."

"And so very much like Sin," Lady Araminta put in softly.

The glow faded from Annaliza's eyes and she flushed scarlet. "Really?" she said haughtily. "I had not remarked the likeness."

"What a little liar you are, Annaliza, and you a reverend's daughter. Shame on you! You know very well that Sin and Adam are as alike as two peas in a pod."

"Well, that is beside the point," Annaliza said hastily. "We were talking of the pearls. I cannot wear them, Lady Araminta."

"Yes you can, dear."

Annaliza looked at her grimly. "I had thought you wanted me to enjoy the ball."

"What a strange thing to say," Lady Araminta protested. "Of course I want you to enjoy the ball."

"It does not seem so to me," Annaliza persisted. "If I wear that necklace, I shall be haunted the whole time. What if I should lose it?"

"You won't," Lady Araminta answered placidly. "I trust you, dear, you know that. Besides, this is the first really important function you will attend, and I want you to look your very best."

"Lady Araminta, please! I simply cannot."

"But I have said I trust you, Annaliza. It's my opinion that you are making a great piece of work about nothing."

"Nothing!" Annaliza repeated in an incredulous voice. "How can you say that?"

"Easily. The pearls are just the thing for the white gown, so let me hear no more protests." Smiling, Lady Araminta rose from the couch and drifted over to the door. "It is all settled, Annaliza." Cutting off the possibility of further argument, she had left the room quickly, closing the door behind her with a sharp little snap.

Coming out of her thoughts, Annaliza moved restlessly, bringing an apology from Grace. "Sorry, Miss Annaliza. Just a while longer. I'm almost finished."

"Don't trouble yourself about me." Annaliza looked down at the kneeling figure. "Poor Grace! Your knees must be aching."

Smiling, Grace shook her head. "I'm all right, Miss Annaliza. I'm used to kneeling."

Annaliza nodded absently, her eyes going to the wide, canopied bed. The white gown, the one she had come to call in her mind "the pearl gown," was spread out on the coverlet.

She had placed it there this morning in order to admire it anew. A froth of satin and lace and subtle veiling, it was the kind of gown that most girls can only dream about. One might imagine a princess wearing it, but never, never Annaliza Sedgewick. And yet she was to wear it tomorrow night, and with it a cloak of silver cloth.

A shiver running through her, Annaliza averted her eyes. A girl in a magical white gown, and the dark, devastatingly handsome Lord Sinclair as her escort. There seemed nothing left to be desired, Annaliza thought. But she did desire more, much more. She did not want an unwilling escort, for she had not the slightest doubt that Sin had been trapped by his mother into doing his duty by the inconvenient female guest.

A burning flush suffused Annaliza's face. She could well imagine the icy civility with which Sin would fulfill his detested duty, the boredom of manner which he would not be quite able to conceal, the drawling voice uttering light pleasantries, but always with that slight edge. Perhaps he would be thinking that if it hadn't been for her, the little country mouse, he might have been with his latest mistress.

Annaliza clenched her teeth against the sound that sought to escape, a sound of fury and bitter jealousy. Damn him anyway, damn him to hell! Why was it her ill fortune to love such a conceited, arrogant, impossible boor? Pain moved inside her as she answered the question. Because, Annaliza Sedgewick, you poor besotted fool, you can no more help loving him than you can help breathing, and the love you feel for Lord Jonathan Sinclair can never be dislodged. Annaliza drew in a quick, shuddering breath. The only defense her pride had against him was to match his arrogance with her own, his coldness with an equal coldness, wounding remark for wounding remark. Ah, but what would she do if those dark eyes should ever look at her with tenderness? Where would her pride be then? Did he ever think of that time when she had been his only defense against the brutal Selwyn, his only safeguard against certain death? Did he remember the shared intimate moments before he had turned once more into the cold and cynical Lord Sin?

Grace felt the trembling in Annaliza's legs, and her heart leaped with alarm. She had been so intent on her task that she had forgotten Madame Blanche's most important rule: "Never keep a client standing overlong. Though you yourself may be tired, you must not let it show. Never show resentment to a client if she should be a little difficult. Never be

rude, or inconsiderate of her comfort. The client comes first in all things, and you must always keep that to the forefront of your mind. And most of all, remember this. If a client should have cause to complain, you will be instantly dismissed from my service." With some difficulty Grace managed to close off Madame Blanche's well-remembered hectoring voice. Hastily thrusting the last pin into place, she climbed stiffly and wearily to her feet. "There, Miss Annaliza, it's done."

"Done?" Annaliza said vaguely.

"Yes, miss. I've finished pinning the gown. Here, let me help you out of it. It won't do for you to get stuck on the pins."

Annaliza stood still obediently as Grace helped her out of the yellow satin, and if her own thoughts were on the white gown, she noticed that Grace's were too, for her eyes went frequently to the bed. "You like that gown, Grace?" she said.

Grace gathered up the yellow satin carefully. "The white one, miss?" Then, as Annaliza nodded, she said enthusiastically, "It's beautiful. I do love pretty things." She gave Annaliza a shy smile. "And I like to see pretty people wearing them," she concluded.

"But I am not in the least pretty, Grace."

"That depends on the person looking at you, miss, and I say you're lovely. You've got a lovely nature, too, which is more than I can say for some of the ladies I attend. It's a pleasure to come to this house, you and Lady Sinclair are that nice to me. His lordship, too."

"His lordship?"

"Yes, miss. Lord Sinclair was just leaving the house when I arrived. He seemed to be in a hurry, but he took time to speak to me. Told me I looked tired and it was a great pity I had to work so hard. Gentle in his ways, he is. He gave me some money and said that I was to use it to buy myself something nice."

Gentle? Sin? Despite her amazement, Annaliza felt a warm glow at this unexpected sidelight on Sin's character. Nevertheless, reluctant to allow the feeling to grow and perhaps upset all her preconceived ideas, she said stiffly, "That was kind of him."

"Yes, miss. But I've always found Lord Sinclair to be a very kind gentleman. Wicked, people call him, but it's a lie. He's good, and always so pleasant to me. Treats me like an equal, he does."

"And why should he not?" Annaliza snapped, her crusading spirit flaring again. "We are all equal in God's sight."

"Ah, yes, miss, in God's sight," Grace answered with a touch of cynicism. "But that's a very different thing, isn't it? I'm afraid the world don't see it God's way." With a resigned shrug she began packing the satin away in a large box. "Lord Sinclair told me he's taking you to the ball tomorrow night," she said over her shoulder. "You're going to look really beautiful in that white gown, Miss Annaliza."

Restraining a wish to ask what else Lord Sinclair had said, Annaliza answered in a low voice, "Yes, Grace, Lord Sinclair will be escorting me."

Grace sighed enviously. "What a treat the two of you will look together. You so dainty and sweet, and him so tall and handsome. The other women will be envying you your escort, miss. And the men will be jealous 'cause you're not on their arm."

"We'll see." Trying to appear indifferent, Annaliza seated herself on a chair by the bed, watching as Grace finished her packing. Poor Grace! she thought, her eyes taking in the drab gray gown with the tiny darns at each elbow. Grace gave out the strong impression of a frightened little woman who went in daily terror of losing her job. Her general appearance, though clean and neat, was decidedly shabby, which meant, in Annaliza's opinion, that despite her undoubted skill, she was grossly underpaid. Quite possibly, although she worked day after day with beautiful fabrics, she had never owned anything pretty or downright frivolous. Moved by pity to a generous impulse, Annaliza said quickly, "Grace, which of my gowns do you admire the most?"

Tying the string on the box, Grace turned to face her. "Why, I don't really know, miss. That's a very hard question for me to answer. Your gowns are all so lovely."

"But you must have a preference."

"Don't know that I have, miss." Grace's scanty gray eyebrows drew together in a thoughtful, frowning line. "Of course, seeing that Madame Blanche employs me, perhaps I should say that her creations are the best."

"Never mind your loyalty to Madame Blanche. The truth, if you please. If you had the pick of my wardrobe, which garment would you choose?"

Grace's frown lifted. "Oh, well, if you put it like that, miss, then it's easy. It wouldn't be a gown I'd choose."

Annaliza looked at her in surprise. "Not a gown? Then what?"

Grace laughed. "I'd pick the pink velvet cloak. It might not be the best velvet, and the fur is only imitation ermine, but it is still the prettiest thing you own."

Annaliza was conscious of a pang of dismay. The pink velvet cloak! The one thing she loved and valued infinitely more than any of the expensive clothing so generously provided by Lady Araminta. Oh, no! It had sentimental value for her. Anything else, but not the cloak. If her father should hear that she had given his gift away, he would not understand. He would be hurt, angry. Annaliza's thoughts veered rapidly; then, as though her father was seated in the room with her, looking on and advising, she knew exactly what he would say. "Of course I will understand, child. You want to make a gift to someone who has nothing. You must know, if you deny your generous impulse, that it will have little value. Give what you most cherish, not something that means little to you."

Her battle won by her recollection of her father's philosophy and character, Annaliza sat up straighter in the chair. "In that case, Grace," she said in a steady voice, "since you admire it so much, the cloak is yours."

"What!" Grace's eyes widened. "Oh, no, Miss Annaliza. It's very good of you, but I couldn't possibly take it."

"I want you to have it, Grace."

"But I know how much you love that cloak, Miss Annaliza. Several times, when I've been waiting for you to return, you've come in wearing it. Lady Sinclair was talking to me once, and she made a little joke about it. She said, 'Miss Annaliza has a real love affair with that cloak. She is bound and determined to wear it until it is quite threadbare.'"

Annaliza smiled. "Lady Sinclair was exaggerating."

"Even so, miss, it suits you well. When you've got it on, you put me in mind of a wild rose."

Her determination to do something for this little woman with the haunted air and the frightened eyes growing, Annaliza said firmly, "Thank you, Grace. And the cloak will look equally as well on you."

Grace blushed. "What, me with my gray hair and my wrinkled face? I'm too old to be wearing such a pretty, youthful thing."

"And if you have the hood drawn forward, who will notice

gray hair and wrinkles?" Annaliza's voice softened. "I really do want you to have it, Grace."

Half-persuaded, Grace giggled. "Imagine me! People will be thinking it's you, and they'll be coming up to pass the time of day. The folks in Sloane Place must be used to you walking out in that cloak."

Annaliza echoed her laughter. "To please me, you must wear it when you leave."

"If . . . if you're sure, miss?" Grace's voice rose questioningly.

"I'm sure."

"Then I'll be honored to wear it, miss. I can just picture my daughter's face when I get home. She'll think it's royalty come visiting." Grace's smile faded suddenly, and she looked anxious. "Before I go home, I have to return the yellow satin to Madame Blanche, and I'm wondering what she'll say when she sees me in the cloak."

Annaliza frowned. "It's really none of Madame Blanche's business, Grace."

"I know, miss. Madame Blanche don't mean to be unkind, but she likes to know everything about her employees. She'll be curious as to where I got the cloak."

"Then if you feel you must make Madame Blanche an explanation," Annaliza said crisply, "you may say that I made you a gift of the cloak." She paused, then added with cunning intent, "Say that as I am such a valued client, you dared not offend me by refusing."

Grace's anxiety lifted. "Oh, miss, you are a one! That's the one thing that Madame will understand. Though she'll likely tell me I look foolish in it, and if I must wear it, I should do it on my own time."

Conquering a surge of dislike for the bullying Madame Blanche, Annaliza said gently, "Never mind, Grace. You may wear it whenever you come to Sloane Place."

"And on my day off, miss," Grace said with a sudden radiant smile. "Thank you ever so much!"

"Then it's settled." Rising from the chair, Annaliza walked across to the wardrobe. Opening the carved door, she drew out the pink cloak. For a moment she stood there, her hand stroking the velvet, remembering Sin's words: "I think that if one could endow the spring season with a face and a form, it would look exactly like you. Fragile, exquisite spring, a slight figure wrapped in an almond-pink cloak. . . ."

Wondering at her stillness, Grace said anxiously, "Why

don't you change your mind and keep it, Miss Annaliza? That lovely thing is much too good for me."

Annaliza turned, smiling. "What a thing to say. Nothing is too good for you, Grace." Moving toward her, she placed the cloak about her shoulders. Tying the satin strings firmly beneath Grace's suddenly tremulous chin, she drew the hood forward. "There. You look very handsome."

"Oh, miss!" Tears welling into her eyes, Grace caressed the velvet with her work-worn fingers. "I do thank you!"

"You've already thanked me over and over." Annaliza laughed, trying to rally the woman out of her tears. "Such a big fuss to make. At the very least, to listen to you, one would think that I had presented you with the queen's state robes."

Sniffing, Grace wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "It's just that I never thought to own anything so pretty." She drew in a quivering breath, and then with an attempt to match Annaliza's lightness of manner, she added unsteadily, "The queen can keep her state robes. They wouldn't be nowhere near as good as my velvet cloak. Not to me, they wouldn't." Now pride of possession rang in her voice. "I'll treasure it, miss, I promise you."

Annaliza nodded. Clad only in her skimpy shift, she became suddenly conscious of the penetrating cold that the closed windows could not entirely keep out. Perhaps a hot bath would rid her of some of the chill. She said absently, "Will you do me a favor, Grace?"

Grace beamed. "Of course I will. You just name it."

Amused by her enthusiasm, Annaliza said quietly, "In that case, before you leave, will you find Lady Sinclair's maid for me. Tell her I'd like to see her."

Grace's brow wrinkled. "I seen Liberty Hayes go out, miss."

Annaliza sighed. "That's right, I remember. It's her day off."

"Will Amy do, miss? I believe she takes care of Lady Sinclair when Liberty Hayes ain't about."

"Amy will do fine, Grace." Annaliza glanced toward the window. "Only four o'clock," she commented, "and already almost dusk."

"Yes, miss, it gets dark early these winter days."

"I think you'd better be off, Grace, or it will be completely dark before you reach your home."

Grace forbore to mention that it would be necessary to

travel to Madame Blanche's shop before she could even think of going home. Picking up the box, she made for the door. "I'll be back when the yellow gown is completed, Miss Annaliza, just in case there's need for further alteration."

"Thank you, Grace. Good night."

"I'll send Amy up straightaway. Good night to you, miss, and God bless you for your kind heart."

Annaliza smiled at the closed door, thinking of Grace's reaction to her gift. It had cost her a pang to part with the cloak, but the woman's pleasure and pride more than made up for that.

Rubbing at her cold arms, Annaliza turned away and walked over to the bed. Divesting herself of the shift, she stared at the white gown, her mind filled with thoughts of Sin. What would he think of her in the fairy-princess gown. Walking over to the long mirror, she held it against her naked body, turning this way and that, trying to see herself through Sin's eyes. Behind her, the door opened abruptly. "Now, by God, but here's a pretty sight!" a deep voice said.

The gown dropping from her nerveless hands, Annaliza swung round to confront Sin. "You!" Her face flamed with outraged modesty. "How dare you come in here without knocking!"

Sin's dark eyes drank in the sight of her. The full, perfectly shaped breasts tipped with dusky-pink nipples, the tiny waist and gently curving hips, the dark triangle of her womanhood, and the sable darkness of the hair that tumbled over her shoulders. He looked at the gown pooled about her feet, and he had the whimsical notion that its white, frothy beauty made her look like a proud goddess arising from foam. "I did knock," he said in an unsteady voice, "but I imagine you were too busy admiring yourself to hear me."

A muscle twitched beside Sin's mouth as Annaliza, with an incoherent exclamation, snatched up the gown and held it defensively in front of her. "Get out!" she shouted.

Sin shook his head. "No, Annaliza, I don't believe I will." Compelled by a need to possess her, he walked toward her. "Don't cover yourself," he said huskily. "You are much too beautiful to be hidden behind all that fancy folderol." His hands reached for the gown, pulled it from her unresisting grasp.

Like one hypnotized, Annaliza stared into his eyes. "Wh—what are you doing here?" she stammered.

"I forget." Sin's fingers caressed her breasts, feeling the im-

mediate response of her nipples. "I had a reason, but I forget." He bent his head to kiss first one thrusting nipple and then the other.

Annaliza trembled, her skin burning and tingling at his touch. This was madness, she thought frantically, trying to fight the weakening flood of desire. Oh, God! Why did she just stand here like some cheap trollop, letting him fondle her? Why didn't she move, push him away, do something, anything? Because you don't want to. The shameful admission sounded deep in her mind. It is going to happen all over again. He is going to take you, just as he did before, and you are going to let him have his way. "Don't" the word was torn from her as she made one last effort to protect herself against his dark, almost wicked fascination. "How . . . how dare you touch m-me! I hate you! Do you hear me? I hate you!"

Sin raised his head and looked at her. "I know you hate me," he said, drawing her closely against him. "You have made that very clear, not once but many times. But for all your hatred, you want me, Annaliza. Can you deny it?"

Her breasts heaved against the smooth fabric of his jacket, and her trembling increased as she felt the hard, demanding bulge of his masculinity. Color surged into her face as she experienced a mad urge to tear his clothes from him, to expose once again to her hungry eyes the lean, brown, muscled length of him. She wanted to touch him, to rest her cheek against his broad chest with its down of dark hair. Irresistibly, she found herself remembering that day by the stream, his sudden entry into her life, the struggle in the water that had led to the rape of her body. She felt again the burning, savage thrill of his lips, his seeking tongue, the searing shock of his entry into her body. Sin was right, she did want him. If he did not take her now, if she managed to send him away, as every decent instinct insisted, then she would die of her unsatisfied hunger, her pain, and her terrible frustration.

Catching sight of herself in the long mirror, Annaliza shuddered and closed her eyes. What a shameful picture was presented in that mirror. She, Annaliza Sedgewick, standing naked in Lord Sinclair's arms! In that flashing glimpse she had seen the feverish glitter of her eyes, her high color, the wanton looseness of her mouth that told of her vast and all-consuming desire for this man. And how many other naked girls had he held in just this way? She was one of many, and she must remember that. She meant nothing to the notorious Lord Sin. She could make him want her, even as she wanted

him, but he would never love her. The inner argument raged on, part of her wanting to send him away before it was too late, the other part, by far the stronger, knowing that she did not have the moral strength. She shivered with ecstasy as Sin's lips touched her breasts again, moved upward to her throat, her closed eyes, her tremulous mouth, making her feel as though he had branded her with fire. She was lost, and she knew it. She had no pride, no dignity to summon to her aid. What now? Was she to become just another in the endless parade of Lord Sin's women? Yes! the voice inside her screamed. Yes, yes! If you cannot have his love, then take these moments. You must have something of him to remember, must, must!

"Annaliza?" Sin said on a questioning note. His mouth touched hers again, tentatively at first. "Annaliza!" He sighed her name against her lips. His light kiss grew rough, brutally demanding, and her mouth opened under the assault in final surrender, her tongue eagerly twining with his.

Sin drew back at last. "Open your eyes, Annaliza." His voice came to her faintly above the drumming in her ears. "Look at me, and then tell me that you don't want me."

Her lids fluttered, lifted, and her desire-drugged eyes looked into his. "You want it all, don't you, Sin?" she whispered. "You want to make me admit it." A flash of anger came, strengthening her voice. "All right, listen. Yes, I want you! Damn you to hell, I want you as one lusting animal wants another! Are you satisfied now? Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Sin was surprised at the pain her words brought, and he was suddenly ashamed. Before his feelings could develop and reason prevail, Annaliza's arms had snaked about his neck. Her body molded itself closely against him, and her mouth clung hotly to his. "Why do you wait, Sin?" She kissed him again. "Take me. Take me now!"

It was too much! Pain vanished, swamped by man's most primeval urge. Lifting her into his arms, Sin carried her over to the bed, her words still echoing in his brain: "I want you as one lusting animal wants another!" Anger came, chasing away the shame and pain. Damn the bitch! Her desire was as great as his. She was the last one who should hurl scornful words at him. "I'll take you!" He almost snarled the words. He held her for a moment longer, then flung her roughly on the bed. "I'll show you what it means to be taken by a lusting animal! There'll be no tenderness in this coupling." His dark,

smoldering eyes never leaving her sprawled form, he began rapidly to undress, flinging his clothes carelessly to one side.

Neither of them heard the soft tap on the door, followed, after a short interval, by its opening. Her eyes widening, her mouth dropping open, Amy stood transfixed on the threshold, taking in the tableau before her. The girl on the bed, her hands impatiently thrusting the clinging hair away from her breasts, and then her arms reaching out in wanton invitation to the tall, lean nakedness of Lord Sinclair. Amy heard the inarticulate sound he made as he flung himself upon the willing, waiting body, followed by Miss Annaliza's low moaning as his lips sought her breasts.

Filled with envy, her heart thumping, the maid stepped back, closing the door quietly behind her. So that was what Miss Annaliza was up to, she thought, running down the stairs, and her making out she was so prim and proper. A reverend's daughter, too. It was scandalous!

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Amy stood there, her eyes faraway. Lord Sinclair was so handsome, so exciting, she thought wistfully, that just the sight of him was enough to drive a girl wild. Still and all, with the way he went on, he ought to think shame of himself. The prim line of Amy's mouth softened to a smile. But there, he probably didn't have any shame. He saw what he wanted, and he took it. Cook had told her that. "It's no wonder Lord Sin is like he is," Cook had said, "what with the way the women fling themselves at him. Won't leave him alone. They ask for what they get, every blamed one of 'em. And of course, he's only too willing to take what they offer."

Had Miss Annaliza offered herself? Amy wondered. If she had, she didn't blame her much. If Amy thought she could get Lord Sin into her bed, she would do exactly the same as Miss Annaliza. Grinning, Amy moved on. She'd have a fine tale to tell Liberty, she thought gleefully. That would give the snooty Liberty Hayes something to think about. Indeed it would.

Annaliza's body burned and throbbed beneath the rough, bruising passage of Sin's lips that sought out and found every vulnerable place, making her writhe and moan, bringing her to a point where she had to bite back a scream. Her hands touched him, fondled, carrying their own feverish message. "Sin!" His name came from her lips like a sob as she arched

upward in blatant invitation. She fell back, moving her legs apart. "Sin!"

Sin ceased his rough play. That part of his mind that was not clouded by passion noted the wildness in her eyes, the trembling of her mouth, and again he felt the uncomfortable sting of shame. What was he doing to her? What right had he to tease her, to punish her for her contemptuous words, when, by his own actions, his insistence on her complete surrender, he had earned them. Never before had he felt the need to apologize to a woman, but now he did, and he heard his own words with surprise. "I'm sorry. I had no right to treat you in such a fashion."

Annaliza shook her head in impatient protest. "It doesn't matter," she panted. "Take me now. Please, Sin!"

His need matched hers, flaring urgently, but he forced his trembling hands to be gentle as he parted her legs to accommodate him, and the last lingering remnants of his unjustified anger melted to a tenderness that increased his desire. Entering her, he moved inside her with slow deliberation, holding himself back to satisfy her, but gradually building his rhythm until it became a savage violence that shook her body and brought ragged cries from her taut throat.

Annaliza moved with him. He was a battering ram, a great driving force! These delirious moments were all she would ever have of him. She must remember every moment! A wave of sensation washed over her, making her cry out in abandoned joy, and thought was lost in the frenzy of her response. Her legs crept up to circle Sin's waist, her body arched, straining, trying vainly to drive him yet deeper inside her. Her nails dug into his heaving shoulders as the stunning shocks of sensation mounted, finally merging into a white-hot tide that carried her swiftly toward the shuddering climax. It came suddenly, a last searing explosion that seemed to Annaliza to tear her apart, and then she was sliding downward from the pinnacle of passion to the quiet peace of release.

When she could breathe easily again, think coherently, she became acutely conscious of their bodies still locked together, quivering with the aftermath of passion. "Annaliza?" Sin's voice came to her softly. "I would like you to forgive me." He rolled to one side, releasing her. "Will you?"

"There is nothing to forgive." Annaliza forced indifference into her voice. "I wanted you as much as you wanted me." She sat up, pushing her hair away from her flushed face. "It is over. It need never be mentioned between us again."

"I see." Sin rose from the bed and began to dress. "And that was all it meant to you, Annaliza, a few moments of pleasure?"

That look in his eyes! She could almost swear it was one of hurt. Hurt? She was a fool! Even so, though she knew it was all in her imagination, she wanted to cry out to him: Don't look at me like that! It meant everything to me. I love you, Sin. To the end of my life I will love you, and if there is an afterlife, I will still be loving you! This is the truth that I have struggled so hard to keep from recognizing. Instead, she said calmly, "But of course. What else could it mean to me?" She smiled brightly. "Why do you ask? Did it mean something different to you?"

Sin shrugged into his jacket. "I don't know," he said surprisingly. He looked at her intently. "You confuse me, Annaliza. I see you first one way and then another. I swear to God that I don't know how I feel."

The bright smile was still pinned to her mouth. "And now I have given you yet another picture of me," Annaliza said in a slightly unsteady voice. "Portrait of a whore."

"Never say that again!" Sin snapped. Turning abruptly, he moved over to the door. Pausing there, he said in a hard voice, "I won't trouble you with my unwelcome presence again, not, that is, until it is time to escort you to the ball."

"Thank you."

Sin gave her an unsmiling nod. "Not at all," he said coldly.

When the door clicked shut behind him, Annaliza fell back against the pillows. Scalding tears filled her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. For a short, wonderful time, she and Sin had been lovers, their bodies joined, moving in mutual ecstasy. Now it was over. There was nothing left, nothing at all, and the distance between them seemed greater than ever.

When Liberty entered the room sometime later, she found Annaliza deep in exhausted sleep, her naked breasts showing above the embroidered quilt. Liberty looked at Annaliza's red, puffy lids, the marks of tears still showing on her face, and then with unwonted gentleness she drew up the quilt, covering the girl decently. "Now, here's a fine thing," she muttered grimly. Her suspicious mind flew to Lord Sinclair, and her thin mouth tightened. "Now, I wonder, I really do." She looked at Annaliza again. "You've been up to something with this girl, my Lord Sin, or my name's not Liberty Hayes."



Richard Manford's eyes narrowed as the pink-cloaked figure came rapidly along Sloane Place. Annaliza Sedgewick, and she was alone! He could scarcely believe his luck. In the two weeks he had been in London, he had been unable to formulate a plan for her eventual capture and punishment, but now that she was alone, he had no further need to think. He knew what he was going to do. Before this heaven-sent moment, he had had several frustrating glimpses of Annaliza. Snugly wrapped in her fancy pink cloak, she had always been accompanied, however, and there had been nothing he could do. Sometimes she would be with the woman he knew to be Lady Sinclair; sometimes a person whom he took to be a servant would trail her at a respectful distance. Once she had been with Lord Sinclair. Sinclair had looked bored and faintly impatient. With the bright daylight shining upon her, Manford was enabled to see her expression in the shadow of the hood, and it had been distinctly stormy. Continuing to watch them furtively from the safety of the alley that adjoined Sloane Place, Manford had chuckled to himself. What had occurred to put that look on Annaliza's face? Perhaps there was trouble in Paradise, he had thought gleefully. Sobering, he had muttered to himself, "You don't know what trouble is yet. But you will, girl, you will!"

His heartbeat accelerating at the thought that Annaliza might yet turn and retrace her steps before she reached the alley, Manford cautiously thrust his head out. Peering through the gathering dusk at the cloaked and hooded figure, he was relieved to find that his fear was groundless. She was drawing steadily nearer, and there was purpose in the way she walked, as though she were hurrying to reach a certain destination.

Manford drew back. In one quick, all-encompassing glance, he had noticed that, with the exception of Annaliza, Sloane Place appeared to be deserted. No doubt, he thought sourly, blowing on his cold hands, the swells were taking their ease in their warm houses. He could picture them lounging in front of roaring fires, drinking tea from dainty little porcelain cups. Likely the only thought to filter into their empty, pleasure-loving heads would be what was for dinner and what they should wear to the function.

Manford's lip curled in savage disgust. The disgust, although he did not realize it, was a mental effort on his part rather than a genuine emotion. Subconsciously, having always believed himself to be superior to these idle aristocrats, or, for that matter, superior to everyone else, he yearned for that life of luxury and ease that he had so often vocally condemned.

Putting aside his thoughts on those who were better placed in this world than he, Manford reflected that it was just as well that Sloane Place was deserted. There would be no busybody to raise the alarm when he jumped out at Annaliza and pulled her into the alley. It was perfect except for one thing. It was dark in the alley, for street lights were not deemed to be necessary in that place of derelict houses. Shortly, so Manford had learned in idle conversation with the local crossingsweeper, Sloane Alley was due to be refurbished and made a worthy adjunct to the select surrounding neighborhood. But for the moment, it was ideal for his purpose.

Stamping his feet surreptitiously in an effort to restore circulation, Manford thought of the tumbledown house at the other end of the alley, where he would drag Annaliza. It would be darker still in there, but it was best to be under cover, for one never knew if someone might take it into his head to use the alley for a trysting place. He thought with regret of the stub of candle he had found in that particular house. Yesterday, too tired to make his way back to the inn where he was staying, he had stayed in the empty, echoing house. While he lay full-length on the dusty, splintered floor, the stub of candle, its feeble flame flickering bravely, had helped to keep the rats at bay. If intuition had warned him that he would find Annaliza wandering along Sloane Place unaccompanied, he would not have allowed the candle to burn itself out. But intuition—usually, in his case, acute—had failed him, and he must work in the dark. A pity. He would have given a great deal to see Annaliza's frantic, terrified ex-

pression when he tore off her clothes and plunged inside her. However, since that was not to be, he would content himself with the fact that she was about to pay a bitter price for her disloyalty, her deceit, and her treachery in going over to the side of the enemy, the spy, Sinclair!

To steady himself, Manford put a trembling hand against the wall, shuddering a little at its damp chill. He would ride the Sedgewick bitch to hell and back. He'd show her no mercy! He would pump into her again and again until he was satisfied that he had crippled her body. After that, he would deal with Sinclair.

Annaliza's footsteps had grown from faint to distinct. Soon she would be passing the mouth of the alley. He could hear the steady beat of her walk, but she must have slowed her pace considerably, he thought, frowning, for she was taking the devil's own time to reach him. Never mind, he would not begrudge the extra few seconds that would see the end of his wait and his physical agony. He shivered. Annaliza, with her fragile body and her apologies for breasts! His views on Annaliza were not shared by his men, he knew. There was not one of them who would not have thrown her down and entered her, had it not been for his restraining presence. Yes, fear of him was all that had kept them in order. Annaliza might not be a great beauty, but he knew well that they had lusted after her. "Luscious," Potter had described Annaliza's figure. "Got tits on her that make a man's mouth water."

Manford's lips tightened as he remembered Potter's enthusiastic praise. In a rare moment of honesty, he admitted to himself that he was perhaps not quite normal in his fleshly desires. A figure such as Annaliza's was, to the normal mind, supremely attractive, an object of masculine desire. To him, her figure was ugly, completely devoid of sexual appeal. He found slender women repulsive, as repulsive as his own idea of beauty was to normal men. From whose genes had come this difference in him? Certainly not from his father's. It was a question of heritage, he supposed. It might be that some far-off ancestor had had the same inclinations.

He moved impatiently. Why was he puzzling his head with these stupid questions? What did it matter? He was happy, well content to be exactly as he was. Even had there been a way to turn himself from the cravings that others considered abnormal, he would not take it. Manford pushed himself away from the wall, his heartbeat accelerating as the footsteps drew level. There was no more time for thought. Anna-

liza was here, and she was about to learn what it meant to betray Richard Manford.

Grace screamed as a dimly seen figure lunged toward her. Dropping the box she had been carrying so carefully, she flailed out with clenched fists, trying desperately to fight off her assailant. Hands gripped her throat, slid to her shoulders, to her thin arms, tightening cruelly, rendering her frantic efforts powerless. Thoughts whirled in frantic chaos through her head. What did this man want with her? Was it money he was after, or was he planning to murder her? She opened her mouth to plead, to beg for her life, but found to her horror that her throat had closed against words. A whimper came from deep inside her. Gaining strength, it turned into a shrill, shattering scream.

Fury surged through Manford. Bloody whore! He had to stop her, or the whole damned neighborhood would be goggling from their doorsteps. "Shut that row!" he hissed. Clapping his hand over her mouth, he dragged her backward into the darkness of the alley. She was still for a moment, and he could feel her violent trembling. Then, as she renewed her struggling, he took his hand from her mouth and lashed out at her.

Sick and dizzy from the hard blow to the side of her head, Grace fell from the man's loosened grasp. Her knees struck the cobbles, sending a jolt of pain all through her body. Sobbing hysterically, she covered her face with her hands and rocked to and fro in an agony of terror. Oh, God, she prayed desperately, please don't let him hurt me! Oh, please, God, help me!

Laughing, Manford pulled her to her feet. "That hurt, didn't it, Annaliza," he said, putting his lips close to her ear. "But that was only a sample, to show you that I mean business."

Grace started. The name he had uttered had no meaning for her at that moment; she only knew that it was not her own. She had only to explain to him that he had made a mistake, and he would let her go. Of course he would. She was unimportant. "I'm not—" she began hopefully.

Manford hit her again. "You have to learn to obey orders, Annaliza. When I tell you to shut up, I mean it. I'll give you one more warning. Utter another sound and I'll kill you here and now!"

A gasping sigh came in answer to his threat. Manford cursed as the velvet-clad figure sagged heavily between his

clutching hands. God damn! The bitch had fainted. He had hit her too hard. He looked down at her crumpled form, tempted to drag her over the slimy cobbles. But no, she might come to and create another uproar. It would be easier and safer to carry her. Effortlessly, for it seemed to him that she weighed little more than a child, surefooted as a cat who treads through darkness to its goal, he strode toward the ruined house he had selected for his purpose. Entering the sagging door, he laid his burden down on the floor. As he undressed swiftly, he cursed again. If only he had a light!

Throwing his clothes to one side, he felt his way to the woman lying on the rubbish-strewn, dusty floor. His fingers fumbling clumsily beneath her chin, he managed to untie the ribbons of the cloak. Thrusting the hampering velvet folds away, he inserted his fingers into the neckline of her gown and tugged. The material, a heavy winterweight, resisted his efforts. Ignoring the obvious answer, which was to pull the gown up and over her head, he persisted. The material, the threads weakened by his violent tugging, gave way suddenly, almost toppling him backward.

Swearing, Manford rubbed his smarting hands briskly together and returned to his task. Raising the unconscious woman, he pulled her arms from the tattered remnants and then laid her down again. The flimsy petticoats and the long drawers presented no problem; they tore with the ease of paper. About to hurl the ruined garments from him, he paused, a thought striking him. Nodding to himself, he ripped a strip from the cotton petticoat. "I'd best gag you, Annaliza," he muttered.

Wadding the material into a ball, he bent over her and pried her jaws open. "I'd like to hear you scream and beg," he went on, thrusting the wad into her mouth, "but I can't take that chance. In the unlikely event that someone should choose the alley for a rendezvous, it would never do to let them hear your screams. They might try to rescue you, and I wouldn't like that. No, my skinny little bitch, I wouldn't like that at all."

Tearing another strip from the petticoat, Manford bound it over her mouth and knotted it behind her head. "Now you can't spit the gag out, Annaliza. You see, Richard Manford thinks of everything."

Exulting in the thought of the ordeal that was soon to be hers, Manford ran his hands over her motionless body. Slender thighs, a flat stomach, a tiny waist, and breasts no bigger

than apples. As though there were eyes in his fingers, he received a vivid impression of her naked body. He shuddered. Perhaps, after all, it was as well that he did not have a light. The actual sight of her might have turned him from his purpose.

Gingerly Manford touched his throbbing, swollen penis. For a moment he was tempted to take her, and to hell with whether she could feel him inside her or not. A vein throbbing in his forehead, he fought the temptation, and won. He must have relief soon, but Annaliza must be fully conscious. She must be aware of every searing moment of her punishment. His rage overcoming him, he seized her and shook her, and then flung her from him. "Wake up!" he shouted. "You hear me, bitch? Wake up!"

As if in response, Grace stirred. Manford felt her fingers touch his hand in a feeble, fluttering motion. A stifled sound came from behind the gag, and her body stiffened as she came back to full awareness. "So you've come round, Annaliza. It's taken you a long time." Manford began to laugh, a high-pitched crazy laughter. "That's good, Annaliza, very good! I wouldn't want you to miss anything."

Grace's heart pounded with terror. There was something stuck in her mouth, something huge and dry and horrible. She tried to spit it out, but it would not yield to her frantic efforts. Oh, God! She could not breathe. She was choking to death! Where was she? What manner of man was it who spoke to her out of the terrible darkness? He had said that name again. But she was not the one he sought. She must tell him, explain. Grace's throat worked as she tried to force words past the obstacle. No use! The man had gagged her. She had been rendered dumb as well as blind! This must be what hell is like, she thought, her body convulsing in a spasm of wild panic. A place that smelled of mice and dust and rotting wood, peopled with helpless creatures, thrust, for their sins, into interminable darkness. Creatures without hope of being delivered from the unseen menace, without even a voice to call on God's mercy.

Grace drew in a difficult breath. She must not think that way. She was being impossibly dramatic. She was not in hell. Most likely she was in one of the decaying houses in Sloane Alley. She moved her legs cautiously, then her arms. Thank God that her limbs were free. Surely, if she could speak to the man, he would let her go. If he would not listen to rea-

son, perhaps she could somehow outwit him and escape. She shivered, feeling a fresh surge of horror as she realized that she was naked. Then, as she felt the softness of the cloak beneath her, her heart lifted with hope. If she could effect an escape, she could rely on the cloak to cover her decently, for there would be no time to search around for her clothes. If she could not manage to snatch up the cloak, then she would run naked through the streets until she reached safety. Anything would be better than to be at the mercy of this terrifying man who called her by a name that was not her own. She listened for a moment to the soft breathing of her captor; then her hand flew to her mouth.

More accustomed now to the intense darkness, Manford saw the dim flurry of movement. "No you don't!" His hand caught at her fragile wrist, twisting it cruelly. "You didn't think I'd see you, eh, Annaliza? If you try to remove the gag again, I promise you that I will break your wrist."

Grace's hands touched him, her fingers trying to convey a message, her muffled voice pleading for mercy. Laughing, Manford thrust her hand aside. "It's no use, Annaliza, I'm not going to let you go. I'm going to cripple your body. I won't kill you, though. I'll stop short of that. If you survive this night, you're welcome to the pitiful life that will be left to you. You lied to me, Annaliza, you betrayed me, and you turned from me to Sinclair. That spy! You dared to bring him into our organization." He laughed again, a hard sound that froze Grace into immobility. "Oh, yes, I know all about it. I saw your face when I shot Sinclair. You're in love with that high-toned swine. But Sinclair won't want you after tonight. No man will."

Grace's head fell limply to one side. At the beginning of this horror, her terror had robbed her of her reasoning power, but now it all made sense. Annaliza Sedgewick, Lord Jonathan Sinclair, and this unseen man who crouched over her, the jealous, discarded lover. He had seen her walking along Sloane Place in the cloak Miss Annaliza habitually wore, and he had believed it was she. Tears stung Grace's eyes. She was no match for this man's superior strength, and she had no way of making him understand. The pink cloak that she had so admired and secretly coveted had proved to be her death warrant. The wild beating of her heart slowed to a sluggish, uneven pace as she realized to the full the hopelessness of her situation. She thought of the man's

words: "If you survive this night, you're welcome to the pitiful life that will be left to you."

Grace made a choked sound. She would not survive, she knew it. Her health, always frail, had worsened lately, and her heart had become weak. I am not Annaliza! The words she could not utter formed in her mind, seeming to stand out in letters of fire. Why me? I have never tried to harm anyone, and it is not fair that my life should end like this. Not fair! The tears that had gathered in her eyes brimmed over and rolled down her seamed cheeks. Shrinking from the contact, she once more touched the man's arm. She felt his muscles quiver and jerk, and hoping to make him understand the message she was trying to convey, she pressed her fingers deeper into his flesh. Please! she tried to articulate against the dry impediment. Listen carefully, hear me! I am not Annaliza, I am not! Light a candle, look at me. I am an old woman, a helpless old woman.

Brutally Manford slapped the trembling hand away. "You sound like a gibbering monkey, and just as unintelligible. If you're trying to plead with me to let you go, save yourself the trouble. You should know me by now. Once my mind is made up, nothing can change it."

No! Grace screamed in her head. No! She rolled sideways in a frantic effort to elude him. Her hands scrabbling over the gritty floor, she managed to gain her feet. Scarcely daring to believe that she might get away from him, she blundered forward, her arms thrust out. The door? Where was the door? Oh, God help her, she could see nothing!

Manford caught her easily. "Naughty!" he said. Dragging her back, he flung her down on the floor. "I told you, Annaliza," he went on, kneeling beside her, "I'm going to cripple you. You wouldn't want to spoil my plans, would you?"

Grace choked on the helpless sobs that shook her. In a pathetic attempt to guard herself, she curled into a fetal position, her hands gripping her knees. Bending over her, cursing the lack of light, Manford traced her quivering outline. "That won't help you, Annaliza. Nothing will." Roughly he pushed her over on her back. "Silly to struggle, when I'm so much stronger. Save your energy, you're going to need it." Straightening her legs, he jerked them apart. "I'm going to give you a little sample now, Annaliza. After you've enjoyed that, there'll be more to come. You can't possibly imagine how much more!" Positioning himself between her thighs, he plunged inside her. The muffled, frenzied sounds that came

from behind the gag added zest as he thrust madly to a shuddering, bursting completion.

Grace went very still as Manford's hot seed jettied forth. He had hurt her badly with his violence. Her body, which had not known a man since her husband's death, almost twenty years ago, felt seared with agony. She had the frightening feeling that he had torn some vital part. Her heart leaped, fluttering like a frantic, trapped bird as she felt a warm trickle down her legs. Blood! Dear God, she was bleeding! Moaning, she pushed feebly at his sweating, still-heaving shoulders. No more! The words raced through her reeling brain. In the name of mercy, no more!

Withdrawing, Manford rolled away from her. Turning on his side, he placed a heavy leg across her thighs. He would need only a short rest, he told himself.

Faint with agony, Grace waited for the trickling of her blood to cease. The madman would come again, he had said so. She prayed it would not be so painful next time. Trying to remove her mind from her suffering, she thought of her wedding night. Her Tom had been very gentle with her that night. He understood her modesty, her fear, and he had set himself to soothe her. Even so, his penetration had hurt, for she was very small. When it was over, she had cried in his arms, refusing to believe his assurances that the next time would be different. But it had been different. Instead of pain, she had known a wild, soaring ecstasy. Dear Tom, with his smiling hazel eyes and his funny lopsided grin. He had been dead these many years, and she was still in love with him. People who knew her had told her that it was impossible to be in love with a dead man, but they were wrong. All the long, weary years without him, and still in love with him. Death had hidden her Tom from her, had robbed her of his physical presence, his tenderness, his love, and his quiet laughter, but he lived for her still, in her mind, her heart, her actions, with every breath she drew, so death had not had the final victory.

Grace moved feebly, gasping as pain tore through her. After Tom's death, she had prayed that he would reveal himself to her, that he would let her know that he still existed in some other world, waiting for her to come to him. He never had revealed himself, but perhaps this time, because she needed him so much, he would. He would come for her, she knew it. Tom, so soft-spoken, so gentle in all his ways, would never allow her to be hurt and terrified. Her lips writhed be-

hind the strip of restricting cloth. "Tom, my darling, the years have been so very long without you. Come for me now. Take me away from this place of horror. Come, my dearest, come!"

Manford came awake slowly, his head moving restlessly against the bunched folds of pink velvet. He felt weak, without even the necessary energy required to open his eyes. Even his brain felt sodden, and it was only with a supreme effort that he forced himself to remember where he was. Sloane Alley. Annaliza! My God! he thought as his memory quickened. It was no wonder he felt so ill, so exhausted. His trick for the quick arousal of the sexual organ had proved, as always, highly successful, but there was a penalty attached to it. A man could not drain himself again and again with scarcely a pause in between, without nature taking its toll. He must be more careful of his health in the future. That particular trick could well kill a man.

Manford shivered as a gust of raw wind swept through the broken window and played icy fingers over his naked body. His eyes jerked open. Full daylight, and he had meant to be away from this cursed shack before dawn broke. He glanced toward the window. It was snowing lightly. But if he knew anything about the weather, it would turn into a heavy fall before long. Cold, rainy November had passed swiftly into a freezing December, and he with his self-imposed task only half-accomplished. No matter. If he could deal as well with Sinclair as he had with Annaliza, he might conceivably be home before Christmas. His lip curled scornfully. Christmas! People making fools of themselves. It was nothing but a damned nuisance! No smuggling craft crossed the Channel in that season. There was no business, not a bloody thing to set his hand to until the annual absurdity was over.

Groaning, he rose shakily to his feet. Without looking at the naked figure on the floor, he located his clothing. Dressing hurriedly, he thrust sockless feet into his boots and clumped over to the window. The falling snowflakes, whirling like feathers tossed on the wind, touched his face in a wet, ghostly caress.

Frowning, Manford stepped back a pace, the problem of Annaliza teasing at his mind. He had lied to himself. He could not let her live. It would be too dangerous. The thought of Annaliza, forced to remember Richard Manford with every pang of her crippled body, had been so satisfactory that

he had deluded himself. Now, facing reality, he knew he must kill her. He would not even need to hide her body. It would remain here undetected until the workmen came to dismantle the houses. It should not take long for him to put paid to Sinclair's account, so if someone should find the remains before the arrival of the workmen, it would not matter. He would long since have shaken the dust of London from his feet.

Manford's dull eyes awakened to gleaming life as he remembered the excesses of the night. The first few times he had taken her, Annaliza had fought him with bucking body and clawing nails. He had liked that. Annaliza had always been a spirited, fighting bitch, and her resistance had added to the excitement. When she had become still, unresisting, he had grown angry. With a feeling that her passivity was robbing him, he had struck her savagely, his blows falling on her face, her head, her breasts. She did not seem to feel the blows. Scarcely breathing, she simply lay there. The last time he had taken her, he had taunted her. "I'm done with you now, Annaliza. I'm going to sleep. When everything is quiet, the rats will come out of their holes. I'm a light sleeper, I can move, defend myself, but can you?" He had felt a quiver run through her body. "Think of the rats, Annaliza. Think of them swarming all over you, gnawing, gnawing!" A muffled cry came from behind the gag. "I can't help you, Annaliza. I've told you, I will be sleeping."

Dismissing memory, Manford turned away from the window and strode over to the limp figure and looked down at her. His eyes distended in utter disbelief. Frozen in position, he simply stood there staring. Wind gusted through the window, stirring the woman's thin gray hair and blowing strands across her contorted, blue-tinged face. Her lifeless eyes were wide open, staring upward. The expression of indescribable horror in them told its own story. Grace Hunt, the innocent victim, had died in torment and an agony of terror. Part of the velvet cloak, sodden with her blood, was crumpled beneath her, the delicate pink stained a dull, rusty brown.

A muscle beside Manford's mouth jerked spasmodically. An old woman! An old woman instead of Annaliza! Almost choking on his rage, he clenched his hands together. The pink cloak, the same height and build as Annaliza. In the darkness, beneath his hands, she had seemed right, but her skin was withered, the elasticity of youth departed these many years. Manford's rage turned upon himself. God damn

him for a fool! He should have known. He should have felt the difference. His expression malevolent, he spit on the littered floor. "This won't make any difference," he muttered. "I'll get you, Annaliza. Both you and Sinclair."

Moving at last, he strode over to the sagging door. Pushing it open, he took a last look at the dead woman. "Why the hell were you wearing that cloak anyway?" he growled. "I suppose you stole it, you old fool! If so, you asked for what you got."



The tall footman straightened to attention as Lord Sinclair, a lady on his arm, approached slowly along the red-carpeted, flower-banked corridor. Lord Sinclair, in black satin, the lapels and the wide cuffs of his impeccably cut jacket faced with silver cloth, presented his usual outstanding and distinguished appearance. The Prince of Wales, whose efforts to outdo Lord Sinclair in the matter of dress were well-known, was clad tonight in pink and gold. From the various remarks the footman had caught, and the rather excessive compliments paid to him by his friends, his highness was more than usually pleased with his appearance. But, as was usually the case with him, his satisfaction would disappear once he caught sight of Lord Sinclair's simple but remarkably striking outfit. It was likely, the footman thought, that his highness would turn green with envy.

Pleased with his little joke, the footman hid a grin. Green with envy, that was a good one. Green would not go too well with pink and gold. Curbing his disrespectful thoughts, he covertly studied Lord Sinclair's companion. The girl, in her lovely white gown, the wide lace-layered skirt rustling and swaying like a blossom stirred by a breeze, seemed to him to be as fresh and as beautiful as a May morning. Her black hair was dressed high to form a shining crown from which ringlets descended to touch her smooth shoulders, the glossy black of the twined tresses serving to emphasize the luster of the pearls about her slender throat. The hairstyle was sophisticated, the footman thought indulgently, but it could not disguise her youth. She must be about eighteen, or, at the most, nineteen. Something about her, perhaps her innocent unpainted face, her shining eyes, and her full, soft mouth, touched him and made him think of his own daughter, who had just

passed her eighteenth birthday. Absurdly, and somewhat to his own surprise, he found himself bristling inwardly in defense of the girl in the white gown. He liked and admired Lord Sinclair, but for all his admiration of that suave and interesting gentleman, he would not like his Sophie to be alone with him. It wouldn't be safe, not with Lord Sin. If all the gossip he had heard about him was true, and he had no reason to believe otherwise, then Lord Sin's current female companion was much too good for him.

"Good evening, Parsons," Sin said, coming to a halt. "Dreaming?" he inquired, smiling faintly. "Or thinking thoughts that you should not?"

Finding the remark just another example of Lord Sinclair's sometimes almost uncanny perception, the footman flushed scarlet. "Good evening, my lord," he said hastily. "I . . . I was thinking of my daughter Sophie." He inclined his white-wigged head to Annaliza. "Good evening, madam."

"Good evening," Annaliza replied softly. Feeling somewhat in awe of this majestic man in his green livery and his short, tightly curled powdered wig, she followed the greeting with a shy smile.

To Annaliza's disappointment, Sin seemed disposed to linger in conversation with the footman. Through the gilded and intricately scrolled double doors she could hear the muted strains of music, and, unconsciously, her small foot in its white satin slipper kept time with the seductive lilt. When those gilded doors opened, she thought wistfully, she would be admitted into a small part of the glamorous world that Sin inhabited. Long after she had returned to her own dull life, she would remember this night, the exotic colors of the massed flowers, the servants in their livery, so correct, bowing from the waist as one passed. The flaring of the torches that lit the guests into Raleigh House, the deep softness of the carpet beneath her feet, the perfume of the ladies who had arrived before them, still lingering hauntingly in the corridor. But most of all she would remember Sin, so breathtakingly handsome in his black-and-silver court dress that there was a catch in her throat every time she looked at him.

Annaliza stole a quick glance at him. Melton, obviously inspired by the occasion, had outdone himself. Tonight he had dressed his master's hair differently. The back hair was caught back in a queue and tied with a black ribbon. The front hair, unrestrained, fell over Sin's forehead in thick, springy curls, giving him a boyish look that belied his

twenty-eight years. Suddenly impatient with her thoughts, Annaliza frowned. Sin's looks were undoubtedly spectacular, but it was not his looks that held her. She loved the man himself, for what he was, and for what she sensed he could be if he would once let down his guard. There was tenderness in him, and though he chose to hide it, a great kindness and compassion. She was in a position to know that inner part of him, for she had been the recipient of that devastating tenderness for a few blissful weeks. Questions whirled in her mind, questions that would forever haunt her. Why, after that time of tenderness, had he so suddenly withdrawn from her? Why, after treating her with such indifference, had he entered her room last night and made love to her for the second time? Remembering, Annaliza felt again the treacherous flooding of her desire. She should have stopped him, but she had wanted him so much. Did he sense the wanton in her, had he always known it was there, just waiting for his touch to set her aflame? Was that why he continued to hold her at arm's length? Even tonight, on their way to Raleigh House, she had felt the sting of his sarcasm. Because of this, and the feeling that he held her cheaply, she must continue to pretend to a hatred that she did not feel. She smiled wryly. Hatred! When she was so inundated with love for him. Without him, her life would be empty and meaningless.

Annaliza touched the pearls about her throat, feeling their smooth, silken warmth between her fingers. The Tudor pearls. One day they would belong to Sin's wife. His wife! She could not bear to think of that unknown woman who would claim his name and his love. She, who would give her very soul to be Sin's wife, hated that shadowy woman! Her heart paining, she listened to the conversation between the two men. "I didn't know you had a daughter, Parsons," Sin was saying. "How old is she?"

Parsons' eyes were suddenly wary. The inquiry was innocent enough in itself, but one never knew with Lord Sin. "She is very young, my lord," he said stiffly...

Correctly gauging the man's thoughts, Sin hid his amusement, but persisted. "Young, eh?" he drawled, his expression bland. "You know, Parsons, I think I should like to meet your daughter."

Parsons' alarm grew. He had been a fool to mention his daughter to a man of Lord Sin's sensuous nature. But he'd not let him get his lecherous hands on his pretty Sophie. Never! Seeking to repair the damage, he answered in an

unconsciously hostile voice, "It is kind of you to say so, my lord, but Sophie is too young to interest you."

Anger caught Sin unaware. What manner of man did Parsons think he was? He had a reputation, it was true, and it was not undeserved, but Parsons' obvious concern with his daughter, his stiffly protective attitude, was somewhat excessive. Did Parsons truly believe that he was such a depraved wretch that he would seek out the girl with the intention of first seducing her and then abandoning her to an unmentionable fate? His sense of humor coming to his aid, Sin said sardonically, "She is too young to interest me, I think you said? I wonder, Parsons, I really do, just how you meant that."

Parsons stared at him, his alarm of a different nature now. Lord Sinclair was a very good friend of the Prince of Wales, and if he valued his job, it behooved him to remember that. Forcing a look of astonishment to his face, he said, "Why, my lord, you have taken my words the wrong way. Truly, I meant no offense. It is simply that my Sophie is a mere child."

His anger entirely gone, Sin forced back laughter. He should be ashamed of himself, but he could not resist leading the man on. "I cannot imagine what makes you think I am offended, Parsons. Do I look offended?"

Parsons eyed him doubtfully. "No, my lord," he said after a fractional pause. "I see now that I was mistaken."

"Of course you were. I should have been hurt had you said otherwise. But as a matter of interest, Parsons, what is the actual age of your daughter?"

Bristling with suspicion again, Parsons descended to a lie. "She . . . she is ten, my lord."

Sin did not believe him for a moment. "Ten," he repeated thoughtfully. "An entertaining and captivating age. I vow, Parsons, I am quite intrigued. It is not generally known, I believe, but I am very fond of children. I repeat, I would like to meet the little girl." He paused. "I feel sure that you would not deny me that pleasure, would you?"

Trapped, Parsons searched around in his mind for a suitable excuse that this man with the penetrating eyes might conceivably believe. "You do me great honor, my lord," he began brightly. "I shall be delighted to have you meet my Sophie, just as soon as she returns."

Sin smiled inwardly. "She is not at home, then, Parsons? How upsetting for you."

"It is indeed, my lord. You have no idea how much I miss

the little creature. Her mother was forced to take her away to the country for the sake of her health, her having been ailing for a while. I am sure your lordship understands."

Sin's dark eyes met the man's blue eyes. "Believe me, Parsons, I understand perfectly. I would be dull indeed if I did not."

At the emphasis laid on the last words, Parsons' flush deepened. Lord Sin knew he had lied! was the first thought that leaped into his mind. He didn't know how he knew, but he did. He might have known he would see through him. He was a devil, was Lord Sin, but a likable devil. Averting his eyes, he said in a low voice, "Thank you, my lord." He glanced briefly at Annaliza. "If I may know the young lady's name, my lord?"

"Certainly, Parsons. I have no secrets from you. You may announce Lord Sinclair and Miss Annaliza Sedgewick."

Annaliza heard the light sarcasm to which she herself had grown distressingly accustomed, and she was suddenly angry. As the man turned away to open the doors, she whispered fiercely, "Should not the servants at least be safe from your cutting tongue, Sin? It seemed to me that you were deliberately baiting that poor man. It was unkind of you."

Sin stiffened, his black brows meeting in a frowning line. How dare the chit upbraid him! Because he felt guilty about last night's violently sensuous episode in her bedroom, his anger at her remark was out of all proportion to the situation. God! he thought with an inner shudder. How Annaliza must hate him for that! It was true that she had been willing, but he could not hide behind that excuse. Instead of taking advantage of her weakness, a weakness that he himself had deliberately stirred, he should have fought down his own raging lust and been strong for her. His heart took up an uneven beat as he remembered the feel of her naked, trembling body in his arms. Those beautiful pink-tipped white breasts of hers! Beneath his caressing fingers they had felt like the softest velvet. Pushing the blood-racing thought of her from him, stubbornly refusing to allow himself to be softened by the picture of exquisite, sweet-scented fragility that Annaliza presented, or to examine the disturbing turmoil of his emotions at the light pressure of the small lace-mitten hand resting on his arm, he said coldly, "You will not rebuke me in front of a servant."

Annaliza looked at him defiantly. "I will, if it is merited."

"I see. Then it would seem, little Miss Sedgewick, that I

have lived up to your expectations of me. Once a boor, always a boor. Remember that, and I cannot shock or disappoint you again."

Annaliza flinched. His low voice was indeed cold, and yet it seemed to her that she had detected an underlying note of hurt. Her heart twinging at this possibility, even as she castigated herself for being a fool, she immediately reversed herself. He had hurt her a great deal, she could not deny it, but the love she felt for him protested against allowing him to be hurt in his turn. Besides, he had not gone entirely unscathed, for she was no meek little mouse. She had traded insults with him, and undoubtedly would again. But that note in his voice! For the moment, at least, it had changed things. Wondering if she had only imagined it, she nonetheless allowed her emotions to guide her. "You are not to say that about yourself!" Her whispering voice, used now in his defense, was fiercer than before. "You are many things, but you are not a boor."

"No?"

Annaliza shook her head vehemently. "No!"

How generous and forgiving she was! Sin thought with a surge of tenderness. He put his hand over hers, pressing her fingers gently. How fierce had been her championing of him, and how suddenly and unbelievably sweet to him was her flushed and earnest face. She should hate him, certainly he had given her enough cause, and yet, strangely, it seemed that she did not. "I deserve your condemnation, Annaliza," he said in a difficult voice, "but I scarcely merit your kindness. Do you think you could possibly forgive me for last night, and for the numerous times I have hurt you?"

Shaken, astounded, Annaliza stared at him with startled eyes. What did this mean? Was it a new form of mental torment he had thought up? Unable entirely to suppress her reawakened suspicion at the remarkable change in him, she stammered, "L-last night was as much my fault as yours. But . . . but if you are sincere about other things, I mean, then of course I f-forgive you."

If Annaliza was astounded, Sin was no less so. Distrusting the new and turbulent feelings she aroused in him, he had gone to considerable trouble to avoid her. When he could not, he had used every means in his power to convince her as well as himself that she meant nothing to him. Until last night, when he had entered her bedroom to deliver a message from his mother, a message completely forgotten in the tide

of events that had followed, he had congratulated himself on the success of his method. Now here he was behaving like some cursed gauche schoolboy, his own words toppling the barrier that he had been at such pains to erect.

Sin gritted his teeth together. Dammit! Why should this sudden and devastating knowledge of his love for Annaliza Sedgewick catch up with him now, here, in the corridor of Raleigh House? But was it true, or merely some kind of delusion? Was he really in love with this fiery, passionate, troublesome little baggage?

Sin's hand tightened over Annaliza's, and he did not notice her startled sidelong glance. By God, it was true! He had boasted that the woman did not exist who could trap him into the folly of love. How wrong he had been. She did exist, and she wasn't a sophisticated woman, but a girl with satin-black hair and wide sherry-colored eyes. A girl with a decided propensity toward trouble, a romp, a hoyden, a country mouse, without the faintest notion of how to go on in the circles he inhabited. She had the devil's own temper, too, he thought ruefully, and it was more than likely that she would keep him in hot water for the rest of his life. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered, if she would only consent to share his life.

A sudden chilling thought struck him. She had felt something for him at one time—she had been too naive to hide it—but what did she feel now? Hatred? He deserved that she should. In his self-inflicted blindness, submerged in his cowardly fear of a sweet and natural emotion, he had not been gentle with her. Sin's heart sank. No, he had been the reverse of gentle. Perhaps it had been only infatuation she had felt for him. But if it had been love, then no doubt his callous treatment of her had killed it. Could he possibly revive that love?—always provided it had been there in the first place.

Sin turned his head quickly as Annaliza removed her hand from beneath his. His emotions raw, he said rather sharply, "What is it?"

Annaliza flushed. "I dropped my fan."

"Let me." Stooping, Sin retrieved the fan. "A pretty little trifle," he said, handing it back to her.

"Yes, isn't it?" Annaliza looked down at the fan. "Just another of the numerous gifts your mother heaps upon me."

Sin caught the faint edge to her voice. "You mustn't mind Mother," he reassured her. "She is very fond of you, and she enjoys giving."

And are you fond of me, Sin? Annaliza longed to ask. Do

you have any feelings for me at all? Instead she answered in a low voice, "I know, and truly I am grateful. But I wish, just once, that I might give something to her."

Sin's thoughts raced. Yourself, Annaliza, give yourself! Become my wife. My mother will be happy to see me settled, and there is no greater gift you could give her. Aloud he said, "She has the pleasure of your company. It is enough."

"No," Annaliza answered, "it is not."

"For my mother, it is. I know her, you see. You have taken the place of the daughter she has always wanted." The smile with which Sin accompanied these words was rather strained, for he was battling a strong desire to inquire into the state of her feelings concerning himself. Now that he had faced the truth, he found that his emotions were completely out of control. Annaliza! He loved her so much! She was so lovely to him, this young, unspoiled girl who insisted upon describing herself as plain.

Annaliza's fingers gripped the fan nervously, her heart leaping at the look in his eyes. Those eyes of his, so intensely dark, so thickly lashed, were warm and ardent. Unable to look at him, she glanced down at the fan again, her fingers tightening on the fragile sticks as a pang of bitter jealousy assailed her. She knew quite well that that look was not for her. Sin was obviously thinking of someone else, his latest mistress, perhaps. Or, as seemed more likely, Lady Charity Renfrew. Melton, who seemed to have singled out Annaliza as a confidant, had told her that, these days, Lord Sinclair's name was linked with that of Lady Charity, the only daughter of the Duke of Strathven. "There's a great deal too much linking, if you ask me," Melton had said gloomily. "I don't say much when I'm around his lordship's pals, but I do use my ears. I know for a fact that wagers are being taken that his lordship will marry Lady Charity."

Trying to hide her pain, Annaliza had said with assumed lightness, "Why the long face, Melton? Don't you approve of Lady Charity?"

With an uneasy look at Liberty, who was engaged in repairing a rent in his shirt, Melton said truculently, "I don't approve, and I make no bones about it. If his lordship must get himself shackled, then I'd just as soon he threw his handkerchief your way, Miss Annaliza."

"That will be enough, Melton," Liberty said without looking up.

"But, my dove, I've a right to speak my mind. I'm telling

you, I wouldn't give a bent coin for that Lady Charity. A bitch, that's what she is." He glared defiantly at Liberty. Then, as her head lifted and she fixed him with sternly condemning eyes, he wilted visibly. "Asking your pardon for the language, ladies," he mumbled.

"So I should think," Liberty shrieked after him as he scuttled thankfully away. "Foul-mouthed lecher that you are!" Turning back to Annaliza, Liberty said in a stern voice, "You are to take no notice of that old fool, Miss Annaliza." She stabbed the needle into the gray flannel material on her lap. "Daft as a loon, he is, and I don't know why I bother with him."

"Because you love him?" Annaliza suggested.

Ignoring her, Liberty went on in a voice of unabated severity, "It's the drink that's addling his brain, Miss Annaliza. Reeking of brandy last night, he was. When I reprimanded him, he told me that I was mistaken. It wasn't brandy I smelled on him, but the gargle he'd been using for his sore throat. Did you ever hear such an absurdity?"

"Perhaps he was telling the truth, Liberty."

"Bah! That sinner wouldn't know the truth if it walked up to him and smacked him in the eye." The needle stabbed again. "Lady Charity indeed! Whatever next!"

Annaliza tried to smile. Finding the effort a dismal failure, she composed her features. "Lady Charity is not a figment of Melton's brain, Liberty," she pointed out in a somber voice. "I have not met her, but I'm sure she must be very beautiful."

Liberty had given her a sharp look. "She's beautiful, all right, if you like those insipid blond looks. Speaking for myself, I can't abide the woman. I'll tell you something else. Neither can his lordship."

"But Melton said—"

"Never you mind what Melton said. Didn't I tell you he's suffering from softening of the brain?"

Annaliza drew in a deep breath. "Then you . . . you don't think that Lord Sinclair is in love with Lady Charity?"

Liberty shook her head. "You should not be here gossiping with a servant, Miss Annaliza. It is unworthy of you."

"I do not think of you as a servant, Liberty."

Liberty looked faintly gratified. Having lectured the girl on the impropriety of the situation, as she considered to be her duty, she became confidential. "Lord Sinclair is not in love with Lady Charity."

With the feeling that she could breathe again, Annaliza had said quickly, "How do you know that?"

"I know his lordship, that's how. His lordship, however, is in love." A faint smile played over Liberty's thin lips. "The trouble is, he doesn't know it."

Annaliza's hand groped toward the table, her fingers gripping the carved edge. "I don't understand. If it is not Lady Charity, then . . . then who?"

Liberty's severity returned. "Until his lordship discovers the nature of his own feelings, I am not prepared to disclose the name of the lady."

Annaliza wanted to shake her, to scream at her. Odious woman! How dare she leave her in such terrible suspense! Sin was in love, and Liberty would not tell her the name of that most fortunate lady. Like a prisoner intent upon turning the knife in the wound, she thought desperately: But I must know! She must tell me! Trying to control her voice, she said, "Won't you tell me the name of the lady, Liberty? You know you can trust me."

"I know nothing of the sort, miss," Liberty answered sharply. She paused considerably, then added in a grudging voice, "Though I will admit, despite evidence to the contrary when I first set eyes on you, that I have found you to be a loyal and straight-dealing girl, and reasonably trustworthy."

Annaliza frowned impatiently. She had not asked the woman for a character reference. "Thank you," she said with a tinge of irony.

Liberty inclined her head graciously. "Praise where praise is due, Miss Annaliza."

"Yes, Liberty, thank you again. But if, as you say, I am trustworthy, why cannot you give me the name?"

"Because I don't choose to." Again that faint smile had touched her lips. "I daresay you'll know in good time, Miss Annaliza."

"I should like to know now," Annaliza persisted.

"Why?" Liberty studied her closely, her head on one side. "I have heard you state more than once that you hate his lordship, so why should his personal life be of interest to you?"

Fairly caught, Annaliza stared at her in scarlet-faced confusion. She wanted to cry out to the grim-faced woman regarding her: I don't hate him, I love him, and it is killing me because he does not love me! Instead she said in an admirably steady voice, "I was merely curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat," Liberty commented. "I remind you again, Miss Annaliza, it is wrong to gossip with a servant. You must remember your place in this household, just as I, in my turn, must remember mine." With this infuriating remark, Liberty had picked up her sewing, marking an end to the conversation.

Annaliza could not leave well enough alone. The thought of Lady Charity Renfrew so obsessed her that she became convinced that Liberty was wrong. From various remarks that Melton let drop, she understood that Sin was still seeing Lady Charity; therefore, he must love her. One day, seated with Lady Araminta in her small sitting room, she asked her the question that had been absorbing all her thoughts. Trying to appear casual, she said, "Sin seems to be seeing a lot of Lady Charity Renfrew. Could it possibly be a serious case between them?"

Lady Araminta smiled placidly. "No, my dear, it could not. Charity is a somewhat wild girl, which is Sin's reason for taking her out in the first place."

"I don't understand."

"Charity's brother, Frederick, is a friend of Sin's. Since Frederick had to be away for a few days, he asked Sin to keep an eye on her. Sin obliged. And despite what the gossips are saying, there is no more to it than that."

"You . . . you are sure he is not in love with her?"

Lady Araminta had given her a long, curious look. "Positive. And since you seem interested, I will tell you that Sin's guardianship ends today with Frederick's return."

Annaliza had felt such a wave of relief that she had not even challenged Lady Araminta's remark concerning her interest. But very soon the relief had given way to a new fear as she remembered Liberty's statement that Sin was in love. With whom? What was she like, this woman Sin supposedly loved? And if he loved, how was it possible for him not to know it? Liberty was normally a truthful woman, but she might have made up the story of Sin being in love and not knowing it himself, for the sake of adding a spice of mystery to her normally prosaic conversation, or merely for the sake of having something to say. And yet, knowing Liberty's sterling character as she did, was it likely? These questions and others gnawed at Annaliza night and day, robbing her of appetite, of sleep. That unknown woman! How she hated her!

Sin heard her small sigh and glanced quickly at her ab-

sorbed face. "Is something the matter, Annaliza?" he asked in that new gentle voice.

Starting, Annaliza came back to the luxurious surroundings of Raleigh House. "No, nothing is the matter, Sin." She looked about her, pretending an interest she did not feel. "This is all very grand, quite overwhelming, in fact. But I am not used to luxury. I fear that, too much of it, and I would become spoiled."

Sin frowned. "You are trying to tell me something, Annaliza. What is it?"

Annaliza smiled at him. "I meant that I will be spoiled for the more simple pleasures of home. And speaking of home, I must go back soon. My father will be arriving in London soon. When he returns to Cornwall, I will travel back with him."

"No!" Sin shot the word at her.

"No?" Annaliza stared at him. "But I must, Sin. I cannot stay here forever."

The words Sin wanted to say would not come. He must have time. He must think! Turning his most intimidating glare on her, he said curtly, "I see no reason why you cannot stay here forever."

Forever? Had he been drinking? Annaliza wondered uneasily. "I should think you would be glad to be r-rid of me," she managed.

"Nonsense! I shall not be glad. Let that be clearly understood, Annaliza. I shall not be glad!"

The suspicion that he had been drinking turning into certainty, Annaliza said quietly, "Thank you, Sin." She attempted a laugh. "But I feel sure that you cannot mean it."

"I never say things I do not mean," Sin replied shortly. He hesitated, then added, "I have grown used to your presence. That being so, you will remain."

Annaliza's temper flared, and she lost all thought of soothing him into a more sober state of mind. Did he want her to continue on as his mistress? Was that his meaning? "You cannot give me orders," she said in a hard voice. "You say I must remain, but I say that I will not! Cornwall is my home, and I intend to return with my father."

"You will do nothing of the sort."

Angry color surged into Annaliza's face. "How dare you! If you think to return to my bedroom and carry on where you left off, you are mistaken. I will not remain as your mistress or as a target for your rudeness."

"Be quiet! Have I not already asked you to forgive me for my treatment of you? What more do you demand of me?"

Annaliza's anger turned to bewilderment. "I don't understand this conversation at all. You know very well that I must go home sometime."

"I do not know that."

"Yes, but I must, whether you understand it or not."

Sin felt the beginning of a headache throbbing behind his eyes. He was in love for the first time in his life, and he did not know what to say, how to act, or even what he could do about it. He had sounded domineering where he had meant to be gentle, dictatorial where he had meant to plead. What in the name of God was the matter with him? Lord Sin! he thought bitterly. Lord Sin, who had such a facile way with women, was now lost for words when faced with his overwhelming love for this young girl. Searching in his mind for something to say, he managed a few brusque words. "I wish to hear no more about it."

Annaliza stiffened. "Indeed! But I have more to say, my lord."

"Then you must save it for later." He extended his arm once more. "We must go in now. Parsons has already announced us three times. The prince will be wondering if we have suddenly become invisible."

Annaliza's hand trembled as she replaced it on his arm. "I did not hear him make the announcement," she said haughtily. "My mind was occupied with other things."

And so was mine, Sin thought grimly. I was wondering if I have a chance with you, my dear, darling, sweet Annaliza. "Come along," he said aloud. "And let me assure you now that there is no reason to be nervous."

"And why should I be nervous?"

Sin sighed. "Smooth down your prickles, Annaliza. If you intend to take offense at everything I say, this evening will become quite unbearable. Most people are nervous when first meeting the Prince of Wales. It is a perfectly natural emotion, and my words were not designed to make you feel inferior. If you bear in mind that the prince is just a man, and a friendly one at that, you should have a pleasant time."

Annaliza's lower lip trembled. "Do you think the prince will like me?" Her voice, robbed of its fire, sounded very subdued.

Sin smiled inwardly at this childlike query. As clearly as if he could see into her mind, he knew what she was thinking.

Who was Annaliza Sedgewick, that the prince should even condescend to notice her? He wanted to tell her: You are my love, my dearest love, and you need be only yourself to draw the prince's attention. But if he casts covetous eyes upon you, and he most likely will, I will have to restrain an urge to kill him! His turbulent, jealous thoughts subsiding, he said quietly, "The prince will like you, Annaliza. Why should he not? I do."

"You, Sin? I don't believe it!"

"Believe it, Annaliza. Believe it!"

Courage and confidence flowed through Annaliza. Sin could never love her, that would be too much to expect, but he did like her. Surely he would not say it if he did not mean it? Because of his words, the look in his eyes, she felt capable of facing a dozen princes, even the king himself. Her smile radiant, she tightened her fingers on his arm. "I am ready, Sin," she said softly.

Her head held high, Annaliza walked into the great ballroom on Sin's arm. Her confident footsteps faltered, stopped. Eyes turned their way, some amused by her obvious awe, some merely curious, but she did not notice as she gazed with delight and wonder at the scene spread out before her. The brilliant yellow bloom of the hundreds of candles lodged in glittering chandeliers, the massed flowers, the red-and-gold tapestries adorning the walls, the great domed and gilded ceiling, so high above her head that she had to crane her neck to look up at it. The highly polished floor, reflecting the swaying multicolored gowns of the women and the satins and brocades of the men as they moved in rhythm to the music. She looked about her for the musicians. Not seeing them, she imagined they must be seated in the gallery, hidden from view by banked greenery.

Annaliza drew in a quivering breath. Glitter, glamour, the rainbow flash of jewels, the mingled scents of flowers and expensive perfumes, sweeping toward her in a fragrant wave. She felt suddenly overwhelmed by it all, small, insignificant, an intruder. Was this really she, Annaliza Sedgewick, standing on the threshold of this magnificent room, her hand resting on the black-clad arm of the handsome, fascinatingly wicked Lord Sin?

Annaliza's eyes went to the far end of the room, lingering on the blond young man who was standing on a platform draped in red and gold. He was talking to a slight dark woman clad in lavender silk. To his left was a tall, spare-

looking man, his eyes surveying the dancers. He stood with squared shoulders in a stiff, military stance. His hair, a darker blond than the young man's, was cropped close to his head. Even from the distance that separated them, Annaliza could see the harsh line of the scar that seamed his cheek, extending from his eye to the corner of his mouth.

Following the direction of her gaze, Sin said quietly, "That is Count von Paschowitz, a distant connection of the royal family."

"What a terrible scar," Annaliza whispered. "Poor man! He must have been involved in a dreadful accident."

Sin laughed softly. "The count would not agree with you that his facial disfigurement is terrible. That is a dueling scar, caused by a saber slash. The count is an officer in the army, and most German officers consider a saber slash to be a mark of honor that testifies to their courage."

"How strange."

Sin shrugged. "The German mind is strange, almost fanatical in matters appertaining to the military. They are a war-minded race." He smiled at her. "The other man, standing with the count, as you have probably guessed, is the Prince of Wales."

Annaliza nodded. She had no need to guess, she knew. Had she not seen him clearly on the day of the royal procession? The procession! Remembering that day, what she had done, Annaliza felt suddenly cold. Would the prince remember her? Her hand tightened convulsively on her fan. Please, God, don't let him remember me as the grimacing, childish idiot I was that day! If he does, I shall die of embarrassment.

Sin watched her face with amused tenderness. Her expression! Those huge, beautiful eyes of hers were opened so wide that she had the look of a child transported to fairyland. Fear brushing him again, he thought: Oh, Annaliza, please love me! Don't let my coldness, my indifference, my cruel tongue, have killed any feeling you might have had for me! The emotions you aroused in me were strange and unsettling; I could not live with them. But I swear I didn't know it was love for you I was feeling. I didn't know, Annaliza!

"Jonathan, what is it?" Annaliza's hushed voice sundered his chaotic thoughts. "You are trembling. Are you feeling unwell?"

Sin looked at her with dazed eyes; then, recovering himself, he said in his customary firm voice, "I am perfectly well.

Let us move on now, Annaliza. There are many people I should like you to meet."

Annaliza nodded. Like one in a dream, she allowed herself to be led forward. She stopped when Sin stopped, smiled, murmured shy greetings to this personage and that, and then moved on again.

"Enchanting!" the Countess of Langford said to her husband. "Miss Annaliza Sedgewick? Hmm! I do not recall hearing her name before, do you, John?"

"No, my dear."

The countess looked thoughtful. "She is not Sin's usual type. I wonder if he is seriously interested? It might be the thing to become better acquainted with her. What do you think, John?"

"Eh? Oh, yes indeed. Whatever you say, my dear."

"Enchanting!" said Sir Frederick Renfrew, unconsciously echoing the countess's words. He turned to his sister. "Where the devil does Sin find these beauties, Charity? That man has more luck than is decent." He prodded his sister with his elbow. "Do you see her, Char? Damned if she doesn't look like a snowdrop come to life."

"Do stop poking me, Freddie!" Lady Charity Renfrew snapped irritably. "Not being blind, naturally I can see her. How could I help it? Any female escorted by Sin automatically becomes the cynosure of all eyes."

Catching the faint note of bitterness in her voice, Sir Frederick grinned. He was aware that Charity had entertained high hopes of making Sin her exclusive property. His grin faded. He was fond of his sister, despite her many faults, and if she had really loved the elusive Lord Sin, he would have been the first to sympathize with the sad plight in which she found herself. But Charity, as he well knew, loved only herself. Spoiled, arrogant, unused to being denied anything she wanted, she simply craved Sin as a new toy. Unfortunately for Charity's ambitious plans, Sin was not the type to become any woman's toy, and least of all Charity's. If she persisted in her pursuit, Frederick thought, she would find this out, and at a considerable cost to her pride. Choosing to ignore the look of petulance on his sister's face, he persisted. "Well, Char, let's have your opinion. Don't you think Sin's new ladybug is ravishing?"

Lady Charity shrugged. "Really, Freddy! This is just another example of your abominable taste. The girl seems to me to be quite ordinary, although I must say that her gown is

in exquisite taste." Her lips curled into a delicate sneer. "I am surprised that Sin should take up with her. Of course, it may be that he has had a surfeit of beauty, and now seeks new fields to conquer."

"Your jealousy is showing, Char," Frederick countered, smiling. "The girl is lovely, and you know it. By the way, don't waste your time scheming to get Sin back, for the sad truth is, old girl, you never had him."

"And just what do you mean by that?"

Ignoring the dangerous note in her voice, Sir Frederick plunged on. "I mean exactly what I say, Char. You never had Sin. As a favor to me, I asked him to keep an eye on you while I was out of town. That is the only reason he squired you about."

Lady Charity's blue eyes flashed, and she raised her ringed hand with the obvious intention of striking him. Warned by the look in his amber eyes, she let it drop to her side. "You are a liar!" she said in a flat voice.

In a nervous gesture, Sir Frederick ran his fingers through his light brown hair, rumpling the carefully arranged style. "Look here, Char, if I've hurt you, I'm sorry. My only intention was to warn you off. After all, it's no use going after Sin if he won't have you, is it? Pride, and all that sort of thing. You understand?"

"Get away from me, you fool!" Lady Charity's emerald-green taffeta skirts swirled as she turned her back on him. "I don't wish to see that vacant face of yours for the rest of the evening."

"All right, Char, if that's the way you want it. If you'll excuse me, I'll line up for my introduction to Miss Snowdrop."

"Do as you please." Lady Charity saw Sir Montague Engles making his way toward her. Forcing a smile to her lips, she moved forward to meet him.

Count von Paschowitz, who had allowed his carefully held shoulders to slump, straightened once more to stiff attention as he saw Lord Sinclair approaching. "*Gott in Himmel!*" he muttered, his cold pale blue eyes warming with appreciation as he regarded the girl on Sinclair's arm. He turned quickly to the Prince of Wales, who had just concluded his conversation with the vivacious Lady Florence Sanders. "*Graf Sinclair ist erschienen, mein Herr,*" he said, a trace of excitement in his usually phlegmatic voice. "*Die Junge Dame mit ihm ist wirklich reizend. Wissen ihre hohheit den Namen?*"

The prince regarded the count from beneath frowning

brows. He disliked the German language, mainly because he had very little mastery over that difficult tongue. To cover this deficiency in himself, he insisted upon English being spoken at all times. "Are we in Germany, Count?" he growled with undisguised sarcasm.

The scar on the count's cheek glowed a bright red as he struggled to keep his temper in check. Bumptious fool! he thought. Had he the audacity to be ashamed of his German heritage? The very thought brought a flash to the arrogant count's eyes and an extra stiffness to his manner. "*Nein, mein Herr,*" he answered sullenly.

"You are doing it again," the prince snapped. "If you are deliberately trying to provoke me, Count, I must advise you against it. You are a visitor to this country, and I would have you remember that. Now, then, you will repeat what you have said. In English this time, please."

The count bowed. "Certainly, Highness. I said, 'No, sir.' "

The prince felt a cold dislike. Damned Prussians! Swallowing his rage, he said coldly, "You are deliberately pretending to misunderstand me, Count, and I do not like it. As you are well aware, I meant the other sentence that you spoke."

"Forgive me, Highness." A mocking smile touched the count's thin lips. "Your Highness wishes me to repeat the sentence word for word?"

"Have I not said so?" the prince answered, an ominous note in his voice. "And I do not care for your attitude, Count. It falls just short of insolence."

"Again I ask your pardon, Highness. I said that Lord Sinclair has arrived, and that the young lady with him is quite lovely. I also made inquiry of your Highness. I wished to know if you know the young lady's name."

The prince gave him a lowering look. He did not like or trust this distant connection of his. In manners and general attitude, the count reminded him uncomfortably of his father, whom he not only feared but heartily detested. Again the suspicion stirred that the arrogant Count von Paschowitz had been attempting to make sport of him. The prince's mouth hardened. If he should find it to be really so, the man would regret it. "I have noted Lord Sinclair's arrival for myself," he answered in an icy voice. "I have also taken stock of the lady with him, and I agree with you that she is lovely. But to answer your question. Unless, as announced several times, she is Miss Annaliza Sedgewick, then I do not know her name. Why

do you ask, Count? Can it be that that cold military machine you call a heart is stirred to passion?"

With some difficulty the count bit back an angry retort. "*Ja, mein Herr,*" he said, forcing his lips to smile.

"I beg your pardon!"

"I mean, yes, sir," the count resumed in his difficult, halting English. "I am not cold and unemotional as you seem to believe, sir. And, yes, I am most interested in the lady. What red-blooded man would not be?"

At heart, the prince was really a good-natured young man, and this remark, naive for von Paschowitz, restored his usual equable temper. "And you, I take it, Karl," he said, smiling, "are a very red-blooded man."

It was the count's turn to suspect sarcasm. Drawing himself to his full impressive height, he said stiffly, "I like to think so, sir."

"Well, if you have a plan in mind regarding the lady, it's too bad. When Lord Sin shows interest in a female, the battle is already lost. We lesser mortals have very little chance against him, I assure you."

The count had little humor. "Your Highness is pleased to jest?" he said uncertainly.

The prince regarded him, a twinkle in his blue eyes. "Well, yes and no, Karl. I don't, for instance, regard myself as a lesser mortal, and neither, I would imagine, do you. But the thing is, as I have found to my chagrin, there are very few females who can stand out against Lord Sin, not when he chooses to exert that damnable charm of his."

"A compliment, sir?" Sin's voice drawled. "From you! I can scarcely believe my ears. However, since I have lost many delectable females to your Highness, your statement, if you will forgive me for saying so, is not exactly true."

"Aye, you've lost 'em to me," the prince answered, directing a beaming smile at him, "but only on the turn of a card, cursed rogue that you are."

"Your Highness has forgotten Coral Winters. When you were around, that lovely did not deign to give me a look."

"Well, never mind about that, Sin. Where the devil have you been, anyway? The footman bawled your names so many times that, when you did not appear, I began to wonder if there was something wrong with my eyesight."

As the prince's eyes fixed upon Annaliza, and in particular upon her décolletage, Sin's smile disappeared. "It would seem

to me, sir," he said coldly, "that your Highness's eyesight is excellent."

The prince looked up quickly, startled by his tone. What was the matter with Sinclair? It was unlike him to be surly. Was there something special about this female? The prince's eyes ran swiftly over her person. Not beautiful, he decided, though those huge sherry-colored eyes, fringed by fantastically long lashes, made her appear so, but there was something about her, something fresh and innocent and infinitely appealing. Could it possibly be that Sin was caught at last? With that peculiar understanding that had always been between them, the prince nodded at Sin. "Private?" he said quietly.

Sin inclined his head. "Very private, sir, and most important to me."

The prince stared at him in astonishment. So it was true! Lord Sin, that hardened and cynical bachelor, was in love at last! Recovering himself, the prince said, "My Lord Sinclair, you are forgetting your manners. You have not yet presented the lady."

"Forgive me, sir." Taking Annaliza's lace-mitten hand in his, Sin gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze and then drew her gently forward. "Your Highness, may I present Miss Annaliza Sedgewick." When Annaliza did not move, he prompted in a low voice, "Annaliza, make your curtsy to the Prince of Wales."

Still gripped by the feeling that she moved in a dream, Annaliza sank into a low curtsy, her satin-and-lace skirts brushing the floor. "Your Highness," she murmured.

"Charming!" the prince said, his voice dropping to a low, intimate note. "I am indeed happy to make your acquaintance, Miss Annaliza." Enthusiastically he bent forward and assisted her to rise. Encountering Sin's eyes, he hastily dropped her hand and stepped back. Damn! He did not know Lord Sin in this new guise of a man in love. That hard, watchful look in his eyes, for instance. It made a fellow feel most uncomfortable, as though he had committed a major crime in touching the girl at all. Incredible to think of Lord Sin in love! He never would have thought it of him, damned if he would! It was to be hoped the cursed brooding fellow wasn't going to make a jealous scene every time someone gave the wench a second glance. Feeling distinctly aggrieved at the staggering turn of events, the prince watched with som-

ber eyes as the count descended the low platform and moved toward Lord Sinclair.

"Count von Paschowitz," Sin said. "Miss Annaliza Sedgewick."

The count bowed low over Annaliza's small hand. "*Wunderbar!*" he said huskily, pressing her fingers to his lips. "May I be permitted the joy of the first dance, Fräulein Annaliza?"

"I believe that particular honor should be mine, Count," the prince intervened.

"Of course, Highness." Reluctantly relinquishing Annaliza's hand, the count cast the prince a look of sour dislike. Then, turning back to Sin, he said in his harsh voice, "Perhaps next time, Graf Sinclair, if you have no objection."

Sin gave him a penetrating look. There was an expression in the light eyes that he instinctively mistrusted. Curbing a desire to issue a curt refusal, he said in a carefully expressionless voice, "That choice must be left to Miss Sedgewick. I am not in a position to dictate her actions."

Disappointed, angry that Sin seemed to have returned to his former disinterested attitude, Annaliza smiled sweetly at the German. "I shall be delighted to give you the next dance, Count. And the one after that, if you desire it."

By gad! the prince thought in alarm as he descended the platform to claim his dance. That little wench is playing with fire, and it is to be hoped, for her sake, that she knows what she's about. By gad! But Sinclair looks positively dangerous! Trying to lighten the tense atmosphere, he said in a jesting tone, "I see, Sin, that you are dressed in your usual somber style." The prince winked at Annaliza. "The night hawk among peacocks, eh?"

"Your Highness knows that I favor a simple style of dress," Sin replied rather curtly.

"Dammit, Sin! What the devil is the matter with you tonight? In my rather inept way, I was complimenting your choice." The prince sighed. "As usual, may fiends fly away with you, you have managed to outshine us all."

Sin laughed. "I scarcely think I have done that, sir. Your own ensemble is smart, and highly effective."

The prince preened. "You really think so?"

"I do, your Highness. But for myself, as you know, I do not care for bright colors."

The prince grinned. "Yes, yes, I am fully aware of that. Now we have that firmly established, will you drop that infernal 'sir' and 'your Highness'? It makes you sound positively

unfriendly. We are not at court now, and this is meant to be an informal occasion. 'George' will do quite well, Sin."

The count, who had not been attending the last part of the conversation, smoothed the front of his dark gray uniform with a complacent hand. "I think what Graf Sinclair is trying to say, sir," he put in, "is that dark colors are perhaps more masculine."

"You are mistaken, Count," Sin said sharply. "I was trying to say nothing of the sort."

His face reddening, the prince glared at von Paschowitz. "When I require your opinion, Count," he snapped, "I will ask for it."

The count drew himself up. "Your pardon, Highness. Let me assure you that I meant no offense."

About to say more, the prince suddenly relented. "Very well. Your manner is unfortunate, but perhaps that comes of having spent twenty years in the army." Turning to Annaliza, the prince hesitated; then, on an unselfish impulse, and in deference to Sin's feelings, he said with that warm charm for which he was well known, "As I have reminded Sin, this is an informal occasion. That being so, I will give you the choice of dancing first with me, or with that somberly dressed fellow over there." He nodded toward Sin. "Well, Miss Annaliza, which one shall it be?"

Longing to dance with Sin, and only with him, Annaliza flashed a look at him. Encountering his anxious frown, which she took to be a black scowl, she placed her hand on the prince's pink satin sleeve. "Was there ever any doubt, sir? I choose you, of course."

Ignoring the unhappiness inspired by her hopeless love for Sin, Annaliza determined to enjoy herself. But even drifting with the prince to romantic music, she found that this was more easily thought than done. She could not quite remember when her infatuation for Sin had turned into a genuine love, but she did know that it was a love that filled her life and that it had become her only reason for being.

Responding to the prince's expert guidance, Annaliza desperately tried to make her mind a blank. This enchanted evening was a golden bubble, she told herself, something that would never happen to her again. If she allowed unhappiness to intrude, the bubble would burst and the dream would be shattered.

Her determination to forget was aided by Sir Frederick Renfrew, who speedily claimed most of her dances, and her

attention. Sir Frederick, an amiable young man, handsome in an unspectacular way, was, she found out, the brother of Lady Charity Renfrew, who had caused her such jealous anguish. She found him to be an amusing and entertaining companion. When, at the end of the third dance, he asked if he might call upon her in Sloane Place, she agreed. Perhaps that would show Sin that she was not unattractive to other men.

Flushed, excited by all the flattering attention she was receiving, her sherry-colored eyes glowing and her shining black hair beginning to fall in attractive disarray from the carefully arranged style, Annaliza drew masculine eyes. Watching her, Sin harshly derided himself for being a fool. But fool or not, the fact of the matter was that he simply could not live without Annaliza. Tonight, when they returned home, he would ask her to marry him. The thought that she might refuse leaped unpleasantly into his mind. To counter it, he beckoned to a passing servant, holding up his empty glass.

Sipping wine, Sin was fully aware that he was drinking too much, but he did not particularly care. Unlike most men who have imbibed too freely, he experienced no impairment in his ability to think. For instance, the thought that he would enjoy breaking Sir Frederick Renfrew's neck stood out in his mind with crystal clarity. His eyes went to Count von Paschowitz. He was standing near the prince, his light eyes fixed upon Annaliza, reminding Sin of a lean gray wolf who impatiently waits to leap upon his prey. He wouldn't mind breaking the German's neck either, Sin thought grimly. In fact, if he had his way, he would take Annaliza by the hand and drag her away from all the cursed male eyes that were following her triumphant progress. He would like to take her home and somehow convince her that she belonged with him, and only with him. Convince her? Would he be able to, or was he setting himself an impossible task? After all, why should she have him, what had he ever done to inspire her affection? Affection? What a tepid word! He wanted her love, he wanted the flame in her heart to match the flame in his. He wanted all of her!

Draining the glass, Sin gestured impatiently. The same servant hurried forward, decanter in hand. I wonder what's up with him? the man thought, filling the glass with the potent wine. Lord Sin was not his old debonair self at all. The ladies, as usual, seemed anxious for his attention, but he had not even spared them a glance. Another thing, he had taken the floor only once, and that was with the dark-haired little

charmer in the beautiful white gown. The rest of the time Lord Sin had spent propping up the wall, staring at the dark-haired young lady, and drinking nonstop.

With a covert glance at Sin's handsome, moody face, the man discreetly placed the decanter next to the replenished glass. Might as well let him help himself, for it was obvious that he had a lot on his mind, and he wouldn't be a bit surprised if it had something to do with the dark-haired young lady. The servant experienced a sudden spurt of surprise at the direction of his own thoughts. Lord Sin? Mooning after a female! He had never thought he would live to see the day.

Shaking his head sadly, the man moved away. He could think of nothing else to explain Lord Sin's unusual attitude. He had not smiled once, and that wasn't like him, for he was usually a very friendly and considerate gentleman. The man's mouth pursed bitterly. Danged females! Sooner or later they got to a man. Ripped him wide open and left his guts exposed to hurt. And did the females care? Nay, not they. They were too intent, with their smiles, their kissing and patting, and their honeyed words, upon getting their own way.

Answering the imperious beckoning of a finger, the servant picked up a fresh decanter and hustled forward to fill Sir Trevor Bingham's glass. So upset was he at the thought of the indomitable Lord Sin caught in the female trap that he spilled a little wine, earning himself a sharp rebuke from the irate Sir Trevor.

Sin stared moodily at Sir Frederick, who was again partnering Annaliza in the dance. Until this moment, he had always had a careless affection for the ingenuous Freddie, but now all he could feel for him was a cold dislike. Freddie had a decided weakness for women, and it would take little encouragement to set him dangling after Annaliza.

Sin's mouth hardened as he caught the gay drift of Annaliza's laughter. Certainly there was no lack of encouragement from her. The flirtation she was conducting with Freddie was a little too obvious, and people were beginning to look their way. How dare she smile at Freddie like that, how dare she! Jealousy and rage boiling into a seething torrent, Sin clenched the stem of the glass. By God, she deserved a beating! He would like to fling up the skirt of that frothy gown and apply his hand to her backside until she screamed for mercy!

"Dear Sin," Lady Charity's purring voice broke in on his chaotic thoughts, "I had been expecting you to come to me, but since you did not, I am forced to come to you."

Sin looked at her, nodding absently. "Hello, Charity."

Slightly daunted, but nonetheless determined to capture his interest, Charity smilingly revolved for his inspection. "Well, Sin? How do you like me tonight?"

With an effort Sin managed to force his mind away from Annaliza. "Very nice," he said in a toneless voice. Then, seeing from her expression that something more was required of him, he added, "You look quite fetching in that green thing."

Charity's smile was rather forced. "This green thing, as you are pleased to call my absolutely ravishing gown, is a French import." She looked at him reproachfully. "It can scarcely be called a thing."

Sin shrugged. "Sorry. I know little about women's clothes."

"No." Charity's voice held a hint of spite. "Your experience is confined solely to what lies beneath the clothes."

"I think, Charity, that you cannot make complaint in that direction. I have not touched you."

Charity flushed. "That is scarcely the remark of a gentleman."

"Sorry again." With an obvious wish to change the subject, Sin said quickly, "The gown suits you very well. Are you having a good time, Charity?"

Charity studied him. "I wonder if you really care, Sin. Oh, well, I won't press that question, for I might not like the answer." She shrugged her slender shoulders. "Let us say that I am having a reasonable time. I could, however, have a better one, if you would ask me to dance with you."

"I must ask you to excuse me. I am not in the mood for dancing." Sin smiled, a mere meaningless movement of his lips. "Besides, it is late, and I'm thinking of going home."

"Late?" Charity stared at him in astonishment. "But, Sin, it has only just turned twelve." Smiling, she put her head to one side and regarded him coyly. "Can this be Lord Sin speaking, he who has been known to carouse all night?"

"The very same, Charity. Didn't you know that I am a reformed character?"

Charity's laughter, of which she was justly proud, tinkled musically. "When the sky falls, perhaps I will believe that. Lord Sin, a reformed character! Mercy me, darling, that is the biggest joke of this almost vanished year."

Sin frowned impatiently. "Perhaps you are right. Then will you accept the fact that I have an infernal headache?"

"No, darling, but I will accept the fact that you are

bored." Charity placed her hand on his sleeve. "Come with me, Sin, let us go someplace where we can be alone. I guarantee that I can banish your boredom."

Sin glanced at her, his dark eyes blank. "I'm sure of that, Charity. But may we leave that highly interesting experiment to another time?" Politely he removed her clinging green-gloved hand from his arm. "If you'll excuse me, I'll collect Annaliza, say my good-bye to the prince, and be on my way."

Mastering her venom, Charity smiled at him. "Poor Sin! Perhaps I was wrong. You really must have a headache. Or is it, by any chance, something else that ails you?" Her eyes glinting maliciously, she glanced toward the dance floor. "Miss Sedgewick is having such a good time with my brother," she said in a silken voice, "that it does seem a shame to cut short her pleasure. I have it! Why not let Freddie take her home? I assure you that he will be only too delighted."

Sin's rage boiled up again. "Confound Freddie! Let him tend to his business, and I'll tend to mine."

"Really, Sin! Why so savage?" Charity forced a laugh. "Are you trying to tell me that Miss Sedgewick is your business?"

"I am telling you exactly that."

"Really. How very interesting. I think, though, that Freddie would dispute that with you."

"What do you mean?"

Charity drew back a little. "There is no need to bark at me. I only meant that Freddie is trying very hard to make Miss Sedgewick his business."

"I can see that for myself," Sin answered grimly. "However, despite his bright hopes in that particular direction, I escorted Annaliza here. That being so, she will return with me."

Charity's blond curls swung as she shook her head vigorously. "I don't think you'll be able to persuade her, darling. It is only my opinion, of course, but she appears to be greatly enamored of my brother. Which only goes to show that she has very poor taste. Were I she, I would prefer you."

Sin's hand clenched. Charity and her damnable goading! he thought savagely. A pity it was not considered the thing to box a lady's ears, for, in the case of Charity Renfrew, he would have given much to break that unwritten law. "Be that

as it may," he answered her coldly, "Annaliza came with me. She will return the same way."

To mask her jealous anger, Charity pouted prettily. "And if Miss Sedgewick refuses, do you intend to drag her off the floor?"

With exaggerated care Sin placed his wineglass on a nearby table. "If I have to."

Charity's eyes opened so wide that they looked like blue saucers. "You would really do that, Sin? You would actually cause a scene?"

"I have a dislike of scenes, Charity," Sin said quietly. "But I am very drunk, and at this moment I am capable of anything. Does that answer your questions?"

"But you can't, Sin. You just can't!"

"If it becomes necessary, I can and I will." He made her a slight bow. "Excuse me, please."

Charity stared after him, her heart beating so fast that she felt sick and giddy. Moving back, she sat down abruptly on an available chair. The unbelievable had happened! My God! Sin was actually in love with that wretched girl! Charity dug her teeth into her lower lip. Bitch! she thought viciously, staring toward Annaliza. Plain-faced bitch! Damn you to hell, Miss Insignificance! I hope you are in love with Sin, and I hope, once he has had enough of you, that he breaks your heart, as he has done with so many others who were foolish enough to love him!

"Dance with me, Charity?" a low, pleasant voice said.

Charity looked up into the face of Marc Lawrence. "You again!" she snapped. "Go away! I wish to be by myself for a while."



His breathing distressed, his hurriedly donned wig awry, Melton, like an obedient dog, trotted after Liberty's striding figure. Changing the feebly flickering lantern he carried to his other hand, he cursed the darkness as he stumbled over a raised paving stone. He might just as well have not brought a lantern at all, for all the good it was doing. "Liberty, my dove," he panted in plaintive accents, "don't you think we've walked far enough?"

Stopping in mid-stride, Liberty turned to face him. "Are you whining again, Melton?" she asked in her most forbidding voice.

"Yes, I am." Melton set down the lantern. "I've got a stitch with all this hurrying," he complained, rubbing at his side.

"A stitch? Where, Melton?"

"Here. In my side."

"Indeed. It is a great wonder to me that you can find your side."

"And what do you mean by that, Lib?"

Liberty drew in an exasperated breath. "Don't call me Lib!" she snapped. "I have had to rebuke you for that particular disrespect on several occasions. I shall be most displeased if it happens again."

"Yes, my dove."

"Very well, I will overlook it this time." Leaning forward, Liberty peered at him in the dim light. "As to my meaning, surely it must be obvious to you?"

Melton shuffled his feet uneasily. "Well, it ain't," he muttered.

"In that case, Melton, since you choose to be obtuse, I will explain." She prodded his side with a bony finger. "I have come to the conclusion that you are far too fat. This, of

course, is your fault. The food you consume at each meal-time would keep an average family well fed and contented. Therefore, it is my opinion that a brisk walk each evening will do you the world of good. If you follow my instructions for your health, you will be surprised at the speed with which all that blubber will disappear. There, now, what have you to say to that?"

Outraged, his vanity stung, Melton answered her with unusual sharpness. "I'll tell you what I got to say, Liberty Hayes. In the first place, I ain't nowhere near fat, and I don't eat no more than is normal for a man. In the second—"

"Nonsense!" Liberty interrupted.

Refusing to be diverted, Melton continued in a belligerent voice, "In the second place, I'll call you Lib whenever I've a mind to, and in the third place, I'm going back to my bed."

Liberty was silent for a moment. "Old fool!" she finally pronounced. "You will not go back to your bed. You will walk with me as far as Sloane Alley."

"I ain't going down that spooky place."

"Don't be ridiculous, Melton. Naturally we are not going down the alley. We will turn back there. That was my meaning. Pick up that lantern and follow me."

Melton's defiance dropped from him at her firm tone, but he made one more attempt to appeal to her. "Be reasonable, my dove. Just 'cause you decided to wait up for Miss Annaliza, that ain't no reason to go dragging a man out of his bed to go walking. It's unfeeling, that's what it is. Besides, it's one o'clock in the morning, and this raw air is bad for my chest."

"So!" Liberty's voice rose indignantly. "I see it all now. You would have a lone woman go walking unaccompanied. Very well, Melton, if that is the sort of man you are, it might be as well if I think twice about marrying you."

Melton's heart leaped in alarm. Difficult and bossy though this woman was, he adored her, and the thought of losing her caused him genuine pain. "Of course I ain't that sort," he reassured her hurriedly. "It just didn't seem to me to be the thing to go walking in the early hours of the morning."

"You should not have been in your bed in any case. What do you think Lord Sinclair will say if he returns from the ball and finds you in your bed snoring like a pig?"

"I don't snore."

"That was not my impression when I tapped on your door. The sounds coming from your room were quite disgusting."

"That ain't so. I'm a delicate sleeper, I am. And I was in

my bed 'cause his lordship said for me not to wait up for him. So there!"

Liberty's booted foot stamped impatiently on the slush caused by trodden snow. "Don't be childish, Melton. If you ask me, his lordship is much too lenient with you." Her lips took on a grim line. "Or perhaps he has other reasons for wishing to be rid of you."

"Eh? What's your meaning?"

"Who can tell what goes on in Lord Sinclair's bedroom?" Liberty said, nodding her bonneted head significantly.

Feeling a sudden rush of loyalty to his master, Melton replied heatedly, "I know what you're meaning to imply, woman, but it ain't so. Lord Sin's a lover of the skirts, all right, and I ain't about to deny it. But he's never brought a female into his home."

"There is Miss Annaliza."

"Well! You ain't meaning to rip Miss Annaliza's name to pieces too, are you?"

"I am not. I have grown fond of Miss Annaliza, and you already know that I am fond of Lord Sinclair. It is simply that I know what I know."

Melton blinked. "And what is it you know?"

"That is none of your business, Melton."

"Oh, ain't it! Well, let me tell you something. Lord Sin wouldn't never fornicate with no female in his own home, and especially not with Miss Annaliza. Respects her, he does."

"Watch your language, Melton!" Liberty said sharply. "As to Lord Sinclair respecting Miss Annaliza, it seems to me that there are other feelings mingled with this supposed respect."

"Is that so!" Resorting to sarcasm, Melton added, "I suppose you think Lord Sin's going to drag Miss Annaliza off to his bedroom and ravish her?"

"I would put nothing past him," Liberty paused, then added significantly, "If the story Amy told me is true, then nothing is past him."

"Amy? What story would that be?"

"That is not your concern. I boxed the girl's ears for her obscenity. Let that suffice."

"I thought you was fond of Lord Sin." Melton sneered.

"I am. But that does not blind me to the fact that he lives up to his nickname. The man is a sinner."

"That so! Well, he ain't about to start nothing with Miss Annaliza, not under the same roof as his mother, he ain't."

"Bah!"

Melton ignored the interjection. "But now you've put the idea into my mind, always provided Miss Annaliza was willing, of course, there's other things he might do."

"What do you mean?" Liberty said in an ominous voice.
"Explain yourself at once, Melton!"

"Explains itself, don't it?"

"Not to me."

"In plain words, I wouldn't put it past his lordship to take Miss Annaliza someplace where he could rip off her clothes and fornicate in peace."

Stiffening, Liberty uttered an outraged shriek. "Animal! How dare you profane my ears with your vile conversation? Take that!" Beside herself, she raised her umbrella and dealt him a sharp thump on the head. "There! Perhaps that will teach you to respect a lady."

Dazed, Melton rubbed at his thundering head. "What you go and do that for?" he moaned.

"You know why," Liberty snapped. "You are a foul-mouthed and disgusting man!"

The pain subsiding somewhat, Melton scowled at her. "I ain't nothing of the sort!" he retorted spiritedly. "And what's more, woman, if you think that's foul language, I'll oblige you with the real thing."

Liberty raised the umbrella threateningly. "Don't you dare!"

Melton fell back a step. He'd better be careful of what he said. Liberty was quite capable of attacking him with that cursed umbrella until she had felled him. She was a terrible woman, was Liberty Hayes. If he didn't love her so much, he would have nothing more to do with her. Wincing with pain, Melton straightened his wig and said in a husky, cautious voice, "Well, after all, my dove, it's not fair to attack a bloke when he ain't expecting it. Shakes his confidence in himself, that do." Melton touched his head gingerly. "You've raised a lump, you have, and you've gone and give me a nasty headache."

Liberty snorted. "I dealt with you as you deserved, Melton. However, I am a fair-minded woman. If you are prepared to apologize for your nastiness, I am prepared to listen."

"But, my dove, this ain't the first time you've gone and attacked me."

"Don't whine, Melton!" Liberty said impatiently. "If there's one thing I can't stomach, it's a whining man."

Melton put up a last feeble resistance. "Well, maybe you'd whine if you had hammers going at it in your head. My skull feels like it's one solid sheet of flame, and that's a fact."

"Nonsense! I trust, under similar circumstances, that I would be more stoic than you."

Melton was greatly tempted to ask her if he should bash her on the head, in order that she could prove her claim. After a second's thought, he decided against it. Best to be cautious, for there was no telling what further injuries she might inflict upon him. He experienced a spasm of bitterness. It came to something when a man had to protect himself against a female, and them supposed to be so frail and delicate. Huh! Enough to make a cat laugh, that was.

"I am waiting, Melton."

"Eh?" Melton blinked anxiously at the poised umbrella. "Waiting for what, my dove?"

"For your apology, of course."

Smothering a fresh surge of bitterness, Melton said in a subdued voice, "I am very sorry, dearest."

"That's better. Now, then, pick up that lantern and follow after me."

"You don't think I'd be better off in my bed?" Melton asked anxiously. "My head's really giving me hell, and I ain't going to be a bit surprised if it don't start snowing again."

"You will be better for the exercise, Melton," Liberty answered him firmly. "And if it should start snowing, I have my umbrella."

Melton nodded glumly, and then desisted as pain stabbed through his temples. "Aye, you've got that, all right."

"Well, then? Are you going to come with me, or must I go on alone?"

Resigned, Melton surrendered to the call of chivalry. "Of course I ain't letting you go alone. What do you take me for?" Wearily he stooped and picked up the lantern. "Come along, my precious dove. To the alley and back, eh?"

"I believe that is what I said." Liberty stalked off. Sighing deeply, his eyes watering with fatigue and pain, Melton followed, gradually increasing his pace until he was proceeding at the same fast trot.

From his hiding place behind the tall bushes that fronted the elegant residence of Lord Sinclair, Manford scowled after their dimly seen departing forms. What were that old bag of bones and the stocky man doing out at this time of the morning? For a moment he wondered where they might be going,

and then he dismissed it as unimportant. He would dearly like to settle his score with that interfering twosome, but after he had dealt with Sinclair and Annaliza, there would be little opportunity.

Shivering in the raw air, Manford touched the pocket weighted down with the pistol. Little opportunity? There would be none at all. The killing of Annaliza Sedgewick would have little impact on the public mind, but the killing of both Annaliza Sedgewick and Lord Jonathan Sinclair would put an entirely different complexion on the matter. Sinclair was an important man; he had been called "one of the towering personalities of the century." There would be a great hue and cry, Manford thought wryly, and it would be necessary for him to go into hiding until such time as he deemed it safe to return to Cornwall. Frowning, he knew a moment of doubt. Might it not be wiser, safer, to forget about Sinclair and Annaliza, to wipe it right out of his mind? The doubt passing, he lifted his head arrogantly. Since when had Richard Manford taken the safe way? The killing of Sinclair and Annaliza was something he had to do, if he was ever to be at peace with himself.

Conscious of a feeling of drowsiness, Manford scooped up a handful of snow and rubbed it vigorously over his face. The cold, biting into him, directed his mind to the lifeless naked body lying in the ruined house in Sloane Alley. Impatiently he dismissed the memory of those wide-open staring eyes with their tortured expression. Whoever the woman was, she was old, and she had lived long enough. She was nothing. Unimportant.

Drying his face with his handkerchief, he wondered how much longer he would have to wait for bloody Lord Sinclair and the Sedgewick bitch to return home. Manford smiled grimly. Earlier, he had been crouched behind the concealing bushes, scanning the house, and considering the possibility of breaking in, once the household had settled down to sleep. His thoughts had been interrupted by a carriage drawing up. The arrival of the carriage was followed almost immediately by the opening of the front door. The two he had marked for death had emerged. Peering through the bushes that likewise bordered the path that led to the house, he had watched them walk to the carriage. Annaliza, in her fancy white gown, a silver cloak falling in gleaming folds from her shoulders, and Sinclair, elegant in black and silver. His hatred mounting, he had been tempted to pull the pistol from his pocket and fire

at them. Caution had restrained him. There was too much flaring torchlight, too much hustle and bustle attending their departure.

Frustrated, Manford had watched the carriage out of sight. When all was quiet, and Sloane Place had settled back to its former dark silence, he had emerged from his hiding place. Obviously Sinclair and Annaliza would not return for some hours, and he saw no purpose in remaining where he was and freezing himself. I'll be back, though, he thought. You can count on that, Sinclair. My first bullet will be for the bitch, and my second will take you. You won't look so handsome, then, with a bullet drilled through your temple. Oh, yes, I'll have you both!

Manford had made his way back to the Royal Inn. As he entered the warmly lit, inviting entrance, a thought came to him. After he had settled his account with Sinclair and Annaliza, he had no need to go into hiding, for, once he was away from Sloane Place, who would think of linking Richard Manford with the double murder? Of course, it would make much more sense if he continued to stay openly at the inn. As was his way when in strange territory, he had become friendly with all, and in particular with Amos Turner, the proprietor of the inn. Because of that charm he knew so well how to exert, he flattered himself that it would never enter Turner's head to connect the shy young Cornish gentleman of the pleasant manner with an act of violence. So he would stay right here, enjoying the comforts of the inn and being shy and charming to all. After a while, he would take a friendly and regretful farewell of his newly acquired friends, and he would return to Cornwall.

The matter settled in his mind, Manford indulged himself in a good dinner and a bottle of the inn's choicest wine. Replete, his mood somewhat mellowed by the wine, he had whiled away time, seated in front of a roaring fire, talking amiably to Amos Turner and to various guests who had assembled to enjoy the warmth.

Promptly at eleven o'clock he rose from his seat. Making the excuse that he had eaten too much and must walk off the effects of the heavy meal before he sought his bed, he had left the inn, followed by the good-natured chaffing of his host and his fellow guests.

It was almost twelve o'clock when he reached Sloane Place and settled once more into his frozen hiding place behind the frost-whitened bushes. Several nips of brandy from the flask

he had prudently brought with him helped to ward off some of the cold and make the waiting slightly more bearable. The mingled effects of wine and brandy almost had him dozing, when the opening of the front door jerked him rudely awake. The thin woman emerged, tugging impatiently at the stocky man. "Come along, Melton, do," he heard her say.

"Hold on!" the man replied in a peevish voice. "I'm trying to fasten my breeches."

"Filthy! You will not speak to me of such an intimate garment, Melton."

"And why not, I should like to know? With your own eyes you see these breeches every day. Decent covering, that's what they are."

"Bah! You don't know the meaning of the word."

"If you say so, my precious dove."

Manford frowned after them, his impatience rising to a new height. The alarming thought came to him that Sinclair and Annaliza might have returned while he was absent from his post. He thought about that for a moment, then dismissed the idea as scarcely feasible. They had been dressed for a special occasion, and one does not return early from an affair of that nature. He had no alternative but to wait, but he hoped to God that the wait would not be too long. He took another sip from the flask, his thoughts dwelling on the pearls he had glimpsed about Annaliza's neck. Might be imitation, of course, but he would take them along with him, provided he had the time, just in case they had some value. He grinned to himself. Certainly, after he was through with Annaliza, she would have no use for them.

His grin lingering, Manford returned the flask to the inner pocket of his jacket. Blowing on his cold hands in a vain effort to warm them, he thought with an almost sensuous pleasure of that all-important moment when Sinclair and Annaliza would arrive back to the house. There would be a look of stark terror on Annaliza's face when he hurdled the tall bushes to confront them. Surprise attack. He had always found it to be best. Before Annaliza could open her mouth to scream, his bullet would silence her forever. Manford nodded, finding this thought very pleasing. Bitch! It would be Richard Manford's image that Annaliza's glazing eyes would retain before they closed in death.

His thoughts turned to Sinclair. The proud, arrogant lord would be caught completely off guard, and it would be his

turn next. The pistol would belch flame, splitting the darkness of the night momentarily. Manford chuckled softly. Even before Sinclair's body hit the ground, he would be away. If he could manage it, Annaliza's pearls would be in his possession.

Manford settled back. It wouldn't hurt to close his eyes for a moment or two, for he had always been an extremely light sleeper. On the instant the Sinclair carriage turned out of Blair Square and began rumbling along Sloane Place, he would be awake, on his feet, and ready. Very ready!

Hastening after Liberty, Melton swung the wavering light of the lantern from side to side, glancing furtively about him. Perhaps it was the throbbing pain in his head or the abrupt awakening from a sound sleep, but for some reason he felt uneasy. He was about to call out to Liberty and again suggest that they return to the house, when she stopped so suddenly that he almost collided with her. "Here we are, Melton, Sloane Alley," she said, turning to face him. "For all your complaining, it wasn't so bad, was it? I'm quite sure you must feel better for the exercise. Walking is very healthy. It expands the lungs to their fullest capacity."

At that moment Melton was not interested in the state of his lungs or his general health. The feeling of uneasiness persisted, and he was more than ever anxious to return to the house. "Come on, Lib." He seized her bony elbow. "Let's be on our way."

Liberty removed her elbow from his grasp. "One second, Melton, I think I see something in the alley. Shine the light, please."

Stepping closer, Melton held up the lantern. "It's a box."

Liberty frowned. "Some people don't care where they throw their garbage. A most unsanitary habit! Melton, pick it up."

"Me? What for? It's just an old empty box."

"I am aware of that." Liberty clicked her tongue impatiently. "You must know, Melton, that I detest litter. Therefore we will take it with us and dispose of it."

"For once in your life, my dove, be reasonable. That box, as you can see, is burst apart from the damp. If I pick it up, it'll drop to pieces and make an even bigger mess."

Liberty peered over his shoulder. "There's something about the shape and color that I seem to recognize," she said in a thoughtful voice. "Now, where have I seen a box like that before?"

"I dunno." Melton wiped trickles of moisture from his face. "And what's more, I don't care. Damned snow is beginning again. I ain't standing around picking up after other folk. I'm going home."

Liberty snatched the lantern from his hand. "Very well, then, I'll do it myself. If people would only pick up litter whenever they see it, the streets of London would not be in such disgusting condition. I truly cannot abide mess. That is something for you to remember, after we are married."

Melton nodded morosely. "Yes my dove."

"See that you always bear that in mind," Liberty said severely. Placing the lantern on the ground, she gingerly picked up the sodden box. "Melton . . ." There was a sudden tinge of excitement in her voice. "It is not empty. There is something inside."

Melton grunted his uninterest. "No use working yourself into a lather. It's likely rubbish."

"One can never be sure." Liberty's stabbing finger pierced through the lid. "There's something soft inside. Probably some kind of material." She beckoned imperiously. "Don't just stand there, Melton. Pick up the light. Hold it so that I can see what it is."

His face set in a sour expression, Melton reluctantly complied. "You shouldn't be fiddling with that," he grumbled. "It's probably just old rags. For all you know, they could have come off somebody diseased. That's how epidemics get started, with people getting nosy and messing about where they've no right to be."

"Stop gabbling, Melton, and hold that light steady."

Melton held out a stiff arm, centering the light. "Lot of nonsense. Here I am, perished to the bone, and do you care? No, not you, you don't give a hoot in hell. You won't be happy until I've come down with a lung fever. Serve you bloody well right if I die, that it will."

Liberty ignored him. "Ah!" she said triumphantly. "No wonder the box seemed familiar. It is one of Madame Blanche's."

"Madame who?"

"Madame Blanche."

"That supposed to tell me something?" Melton said sullenly. "Who the hell is Madame Blanche?"

"Oh, never mind!" Liberty ripped the soggy box apart. "Look, Melton, it's yellow satin, and of a very expensive quality." Paying no attention to Melton's renewed grumbling,

she gently eased the material out and held it up. "Why, this is a gown in preparation. See how the pieces are pinned together in readiness for sewing?"

Melton stamped his feet in an effort to warm them. "I don't know nothing about gowns or sewing, and don't want to. Anyway, it looks like a ratty old thing to me."

"Hold your tongue, Melton! Ratty old thing indeed. This was intended to be an exclusive model, let me tell you."

"That don't mean nothing to me. Bring the damned thing with you, if you feel you got to, but let's get on home." He stamped his feet again. "My bloody toes feel like they've dropped off in my boots."

Liberty continued to stare at the yellow satin. "Melton!" Her precise voice held a distinct quaver. "Unless I am mistaken, and I don't think I am, this is the gown that was being fashioned for Miss Annaliza."

"Miss Annaliza! Go on with you. You must be going soft in the head."

"I am not. I recognize both the style and the color. A most unusual shade of yellow. I remember remarking upon it."

"That a fact?" Melton jeered. "And what would Miss Annaliza's gown be doing here, thrown down in the alley to get ruined? It don't make sense. You got to admit that, Lib."

"Don't call me Lib," she reproved him absently. "But you're right, Melton, it doesn't make sense. I'm thinking there's more in this than meets the eye."

"No sense in worrying about it," Melton said, trying to hide his impatience. "I daresay there's a reasonable explanation."

"You think so, do you? And what would you call a reasonable explanation?"

Melton hesitated. "Ain't it possible it got dropped by accident?" he suggested. "The person carrying it might have been in a big hurry, and never noticed it was gone."

Liberty drew in a sharp, exasperated breath. "There are times, Melton, when I think you are the biggest fool in creation. How could anybody drop a great box like this and not notice?"

Melton shrugged. "You know how it is. Some folks are very careless."

Liberty shook her head. "The person carrying this box had to be Grace Hunt, Madame Blanche's seamstress. Grace is an admirable woman, most conscientious. I approve of her."

"Good for her." Melton cast a disparaging look at the

material clutched in Liberty's hand. "Don't look like she's very conscientious to me."

"Be quiet, Melton! Let me think." Liberty put a considering finger to her lips. "I wonder, now, if Grace could have met with an accident."

"Eh?" Melton stared at Liberty's absorbed face. "What kind of an accident?"

"If I knew that, fool, I would not be standing here wondering." Her annoyance passing, Liberty looked thoughtfully down the dark entrance to the alley. "Perhaps she was curious about the abandoned houses and decided to investigate."

"That can't be right," Melton pointed out reasonably. "Suppose she did want to go exploring. She'd still have the box with her, wouldn't she?"

Baffled, Liberty said in an uncertain voice, "I don't know, Melton. I just don't know. Maybe she wanted her hands free to hold a light."

"It still don't make sense," Melton objected. "She'd surely have hid the box, just in case it got stolen."

"Another nonsensical notion, Melton. The people who live in the houses along Sloane Place are wealthy, many of them titled. Why should they bother to steal?"

"Huh! You'd be surprised what some of the swells get up to. I once worked for a gentleman, Sir Jeremy Travers, his name was, and he didn't think nothing of forking his friends' pockets. Something he couldn't help, Sir Jeremy told me. He'd always been like that, even when he was a little nipper."

"Melton," Liberty said in a dangerous voice, "I am not interested in Sir Jeremy Travers."

"Well, I just thought I'd point out—"

"I don't wish to hear it, Melton."

"Suits me. Let's go home."

"We will not go home, Melton. I have come to a decision."

Conscious of a distinct sinking of his heart, Melton said reluctantly, "What . . . what sort of decision?"

"I have a strong feeling that something is very wrong," Liberty answered. "Grace Hunt might have fallen. Perhaps she is lying in one of the abandoned houses, unconscious. She might even have met with foul play, which would explain the dropped box."

Melton backed a step. "Now, Lib . . . now, my dove!" he said in an alarmed voice. "If you're thinking of poking about in that alley, put it out of your mind. Who knows but what one of them crazy houses might not collapse on us."

"My point exactly."

"Don't do it, Lib!"

Carefully Liberty replaced the box where she had found it. "I am a Christian woman, Melton. Something has happened to Grace Hunt, I feel it here." She pointed in the direction of her heart. "That being so, I could not rest easy in my bed if I neglected what I perceive to be my duty to a fellow human being."

Melton goggled at her, his alarm growing. "It's more'n likely that Grace Hunt is in her bed sleeping. Which is what we should be doing."

"Possibly. We will find out, will we not? Now, come along, Melton. It won't take long. There are only six houses in this alley."

"I don't care if there's only one. I ain't going down there! That place is spooky enough in the daylight, let alone when it's pitch dark."

Liberty drew herself up. "Can it be that I am planning to marry a coward?" she asked in an icy voice.

"That ain't fair of you to say that!" Melton blustered. "You know good and well I ain't no coward. I just like to be cautious, that's all."

"It would seem to me that you are giving an excellent imitation of cowardice," Liberty said dryly.

"That's hurtful, my dove," Melton cried in a wounded voice. "Promised to marry me, you have, and it's got me fair beat how you can be so cruel."

Liberty considered him. "It was not my intention to be cruel, Melton. It may be that I have misjudged you."

"You done that, all right. Me a coward! That's a laugh, that is."

"In that case, if I have misjudged you, I know you will find pleasure in proving me wrong." Liberty took his arm. "Come along, Melton. Don't dawdle!"

Defeated, Liberty's pincerlike grip urging him on, Melton allowed himself to be led into the alley. A coward, she had called him! Him, who had endured that ghastly crawl through that tunnel in Cornwall. He would never forget how Liberty had crawled behind him, jabbing him with her umbrella. Fighting for breath in the narrow confines of the tunnel, his best clothes shredded, his hands and knees burning with pain, he had gone doggedly onward. But Liberty, as was usual with the pesky woman, had chosen to forget his courage in that instance. It was true that that terrible crawl had eventually

brought them to the kidnapped Lord Sinclair. But that particular memory still gave him nightmares. Still, it was no use arguing with Liberty, he thought resignedly. She didn't care if a murderer might be lurking in the alley, foaming at the mouth, and just waiting to pounce. As always, Liberty was bound and determined to have her own way. She was that kind of woman, and it was his misfortune to love her. In a last feeble effort to assert himself, he said in what he hoped was a firm voice, "I don't mind looking through a couple of the old ruins, Lib, but no more than that. Understand?"

Liberty's fingers tightened on his arm. "Don't talk nonsense, Melton. Whether you like it or not, my mind is firmly made up. If necessary, we will look through all six houses. You will feel better after you have done your duty. Your conscience will not trouble you, and you can rest in your bed without reproach."

Melton wanted to tell her that he would have no trouble whatsoever with his conscience, but he desisted. There was no point in stirring her up. Sighing, he said, "Very well, my dove. Whatever you say."

They found Grace Hunt in the fourth house. Looking down at that pitiful naked form, Liberty began to tremble. "Dear God!" she said in a shaking voice. "Who could have done such a terrible thing to her?"

Curbing a desire to vomit, Melton put a comforting arm about Liberty's shoulders. "I know just how you feel, my lovie. But don't look at her no more, Lib. I'll cover her with my coat for now, and then I'll take you home."

Unfamiliar tears glittering in her eyes, Liberty turned a blanched face to him. "Home? But we can't just go off and leave Grace here. It would be inhuman!"

Melton swallowed as he inadvertently looked into the staring, agonized eyes of the dead woman. "We'll only be leaving Grace for a little while," he said huskily. "Just until I inform the proper authorities. Got to be done, Lib."

"I know." Liberty wiped her wet eyes with the back of her hand. "I'm not thinking straight. Thank God you're here, Melton! I know I can rely upon you to do the right thing."

"You can always rely on me, Lib. I want you to remember that."

She looked at him, her expression strangely vulnerable. "I have . . . have really always known that. But, Melton, I don't feel right about going home. I feel that I should stay with Grace."

Melton sensed the wavering of Liberty's strong spirit, and he felt a rush of sympathy for her. Liberty, always so decisive, was frightened now, uncertain. Firmly, knowing that he would not be rebuffed, he took control of the situation. "You're going home, Lib. You can't do anything for Grace. Ain't nothing can hurt her no more."

"Very well, Melton." Liberty turned away. "M-Melton, will you take the gag from her mouth and close her eyes?"

"Well, I don't know about that, Lib," Melton said hesitantly. "I shouldn't really touch nothing. Might destroy a clue or something."

"Please!" It was an agonized cry.

"All right, Lib," Melton said hastily. "Don't you fret yourself. I'll do it."

Liberty waited until Melton had completed his gruesome task. From the corner of her eye she saw him shiver as he removed his coat and placed it gently over Grace Hunt's stiff form, and she knew that it was not the cold that had caused that faint convulsion of his body. When he turned to face her again, she saw the white line of strain about his mouth. With an inarticulate cry she flung herself into his arms and felt them close about her. "Oh, Melton!" She pressed her trembling body close to his. "Poor Grace! Poor, pathetic little soul!"

Melton patted her gently. "I know exactly how you feel," he said soothingly. "I never knew Grace Hunt, except in passing, but this is a terrible shock for the both of us. To tell you the truth, I ain't feeling too good. I think we should get away now, lovie."

"In a minute, Melton." Liberty's fingers gripped his shoulders. "There is something I must tell you first."

"And what's that, my dove?"

"The cloak beside Grace. Did you notice it?"

Battling with the nausea again, Melton nodded. "Couldn't help noticing, Lib," he said in a difficult voice. "She's lying on part of it, and that part is badly stained with her blood."

Liberty shuddered. "I know," she whispered. "But, Melton, that cloak belongs to Miss Annaliza."

Melton started violently. "What! Do you know what you are saying, woman?"

"I know," Liberty answered with a hint of her old firmness. "I am absolutely sure, Melton."

"Christ!" Releasing her, Melton placed his hands on her shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes. "It might not be

the same one, Lib. Could be that Grace Hunt had one just like Miss Annaliza's."

Liberty shook her head. "No, Melton. While it's true that the velvet is a cheap-grade material, and the fur trimming is imitation, the Reverend Sedgewick had that cloak specially made for his daughter. He confided in me that—"

"But, Lib," Melton interrupted, "if it's a cheap garment, ain't that all the more reason to believe that there could be more than one of them cloaks going about?"

"I was about to tell you, Melton, that the reverend confided in me that he had designed the cloak himself. The seamstress who made it is an old friend of the reverend's. She promised him that she would not reproduce the model."

"Maybe she broke her word."

"I don't think she would do that. But even if she did, her establishment is in Cornwall."

Melton stared at her. "In that case, how do you account for the cloak being here."

"I can't, Melton. That's just the point."

Melton hesitated. "Could be that Miss Annaliza lent Grace the cloak. Might even have given it to her. Yes, that must be it!"

"No." Liberty shook her head. "Some other cloak, perhaps, but not the pink one. It was a gift from her father, and Miss Annaliza cherished it for that reason."

"You think Grace stole it?" Melton muttered, casting an apologetic look at the covered figure.

"Grace wasn't that kind. I'm certain of it. And yet I can think of no other explanation." Liberty's cold, still-trembling hand fumbled for his. "Come, Melton. We must lodge the information about the murder of Grace Hunt. Later, when I deem it to be the proper time, I will ask Miss Annaliza about the cloak."

On the walk home, unusually slow for Liberty, who was still badly shaken from witnessing the evidence of violent death, she nonetheless gave unmistakable indications of a recovering spirit. What a woman! Melton thought proudly. Nothing could crush her for too long. She was indomitable! Melton's admiring thoughts were borne out when, regardless of the falling snow, Liberty stopped walking and turned to face him. "Melton," she said in her customary sharp voice, "I have been trying to work out the mystery of the cloak and its connection with Grace Hunt's death."

"Have you, my dove?" Melton answered her indulgently.
"But why should there be any connection between the two?"

"Because there is. I feel it. And you know me and my feelings, Melton."

"Aye, I do at that." Warmed by the memory of her clinging femininity in that grim house of death, Melton smiled at her tenderly. "All the same, Lib, I'd rather you didn't go tiring your brain no more. Let them that's experienced in murder work it out."

"Will you stop talking, Melton, and listen to me?" Liberty said impatiently. "I think I have it. I believe it was Miss Annaliza who was meant to die, not Grace Hunt."

In the dim glow shed by the lantern, Melton scrutinized her taut face with some concern. Perhaps, after all, his Liberty was not quite as indomitable as he had believed. "Yes, my dove," he said soothingly. "I expect you're right. The killer was after Miss Annaliza. Now, I wonder why I didn't think of that? Come along with me," he went on, trying to urge her forward. "That's my good girl."

Outraged, Liberty resisted his attempt to move her. "Fool!" she snapped. "I will not be humored. Are you actually daring to suggest that I have lost my mind?"

"No, no, of course not," Melton said hastily. "You're tired, like me. It's all been a little too much for you."

"Have you quite finished, Melton?"

"Yes, Lib." He held out his hand. "Won't you come along with me? You know I only want what's best for you, my precious dove."

Liberty struck his hand aside. "You're going to listen to me, Melton, if I have to scream at the top of my voice."

Melton shook his head sadly. "Don't do that, lovie. Of course I'll listen."

"I should hope so. Now, tell me this, Melton. How often have you seen Miss Annaliza wearing her pink cloak?"

Melton sighed, wondering why it was necessary to conduct question-and-answer games in the growing discomfort of the swirling snow. "Just about every time I seen her," he answered reluctantly. "Miss Annaliza was always wearing that pink cloak. Favorite of hers, I'd say."

"But you didn't recognize it when . . . when we found Grace Hunt?"

"Well, that ain't surprising, Lib. I was too shaken."

"But the killer recognized that cloak. Are you beginning to get it, Melton?"

Melton shifted his feet, wishing she'd hurry it along. "Can't say I do, Lib."

"Bah! It's becoming more and more obvious to me. As you said yourself, Miss Annaliza was always wearing the cloak. Grace Hunt, for some reason that I have not yet worked out, was wearing it the last time she left the house in Sloane Place. Grace liked Miss Annaliza, and she did tend to drag the time out, so it was likely dusk when she finally left. The killer was waiting, but he did not see Grace Hunt, he saw only what she was wearing. He believed she was Miss Annaliza, and he killed her. Now do you understand?"

Gaping at her, Melton saw the flaws in this display of logic, and he was quick to point them out. "I know you think you got it all tied up nice and neat, Lib, but I got to disagree with you."

"Oh. Explain yourself, Melton!"

"No need to bark at a bloke just 'cause he don't think along your lines."

"Melton!"

"All right. Think for a minute, Lib. What makes you believe the murderer was after either of them? Ain't it struck you that he could be a madman? Maybe he just took a notion into his addled head to kill somebody, and Grace Hunt was the first one to happen along. That's just as likely, ain't it?"

"Perhaps," Liberty conceded reluctantly. "But I still believe that my theory is the right one."

You would! Melton thought gloomily. Once you get an idea in your head, aint no power on earth can shake it. "Now, look here, Lib," he continued to argue, "even if you're right, who could possibly hate Miss Annaliza enough to kill her? As far as I know, she don't have no enemies."

"Doesn't she? I can think of one. Richard Manford."

"That smuggler!" Melton snorted contemptuously. "You can bet your life he wouldn't dare to show his face. No, Lib, that one'll still be holed up somewhere. Kidnapping is a serious offense, especially when it involves someone of the standing of Lord Sinclair. Manford would have sense enough to know that, and he'd keep hid for fear the law would nab him."

Liberty frowned thoughtfully. "I wouldn't be too sure of that. That time when Miss Annaliza was recovering from the shock of her experience, she told me a lot about Manford. She said that he's two men in one. He can be boyish and charming, or ruthless and cruel. For a long time she believed

the charming one was the real Manford. Then, on the night of the kidnapping, she found out her mistake."

"Be that as it may, Lib, that don't mean he'd want to kill Miss Annaliza."

"Miss Annaliza heard the other smugglers talking that night," Liberty went on, ignoring the interjection. "That was just before Lord Sinclair showed up. And she heard plenty about Manford, believe me. He's cruel, a killer, and he will always punish what he considers to be an injury to himself."

"But Miss Annaliza ain't done him no injury," Melton objected.

"Miss Annaliza turned from him to Lord Sinclair. And toward the end of their terrible experience in that cottage, she did not try to hide her hatred of Manford. That would be enough for him."

Melton made an exasperated sound. "Talk sense, Lib! The man would have to be insane to kill for a reason like that."

"But that's just my point, Melton. From all I've heard about Manford, he appears to be an egomaniac."

"What's that?"

Liberty waved an impatient hand. "I'll explain later. But in my opinion, that sort, if they believe they've been slighted, do tend to go off their heads."

"Stretching it a bit far, ain't you?" Melton protested.

"I don't think so. I've heard some very strange things about Manford. I told you, didn't I, that Miss Annaliza heard the other smugglers talking?"

"Yes, Lib," Melton said with strained patience. "You told me."

"I think Manford will come after Miss Annaliza, Melton. And for the matter of that, Lord Sinclair too."

"Oh. And what's he done to Manford?"

"His lordship escaped," Liberty said simply.

Melton uttered a sarcastic laugh. "And you think that's reason enough for Manford to kill him, eh?"

Liberty nodded. "For someone like Manford, yes."

Melton held fast to his vanishing patience. "In that case," he said with an attempt at humor, "it'd be as well for us to hurry along, don't you think?"

Blinking snow from her lashes, Liberty stared at him. "And what do you mean by that?"

"We won't be safe if Manford's hanging around here somewhere. You ain't forgot, have you, Lib, that we helped Miss Annaliza and Lord Sinclair to escape?"

Liberty started. "You're right. I hadn't thought of that. Naturally he would be after us too."

"Oh, come on, Lib! I was just having a little joke with you. It stands to reason, since this Manford ain't never set eyes on us, nor us on him, that he can't be after us."

Refusing the solace offered by these practical words, Liberty said sharply, "One should never be too sure of anything. Have you forgotten the other man at the cottage, that vile beast who took advantage of Miss Annaliza?"

"No. And I ain't about to forget him," Melton said grimly. "But why'd you mention him, Lib?"

"You remember I knocked him on the head, Melton? Well, just before I did so, he had a good look at us. Isn't it possible that he could have described us to Manford?"

"Maybe, and then again, maybe not." Despite the prompting of his common sense, Melton was conscious of a twinge of apprehension. "Let's stop the jabbering, Lib," he said in an abrupt voice. "I'm bloody cold, and you must be too. I want to get you home."

"There is no need to indulge in foul language, Melton." Trying to hide her own eagerness to be once more within the safe, warm confines of the house, Liberty took his arm. "The trouble with you," she said severely, "is that you think too much of your creature comforts. I cannot approve of this pampering of the flesh, but I will overlook it this one time. Come along, since you are so insistent. Let us go."

"Can't see that I'm going to be doing too much pampering of my flesh," Melton answered gloomily. "After I've dropped you off, I'm going on to report the murder."

Liberty's hand tightened on Melton's arm as memory showed her a flashing picture of the murdered woman. Tragic Grace Hunt, lying in a congealed pool of her own blood. Oh, the shudder-making touch of her marble-cold flesh, the sightless, staring eyes with their look of horror, the anguished, contorted face! Liberty thought of the cruel gag thrust deeply into Grace's mouth. It would have cut off any appeal for mercy that she might have made. Only God would ever know the tortures the poor woman must have undergone before she died. God, and the murderer! Tears once more filling her eyes, Liberty stumbled, and was forced to clutch at Melton to right herself. "Melton," she said in a thick, difficult voice, "I have come to the conclusion that I am a very wicked woman. And even worse, I am a hypocrite."

"No, no, lovie. Don't say such things about yourself."

"I will say them," Liberty insisted passionately. "I must say them, Melton, because they are true!"

Melton cleared his throat. Now, what bee had she got in her bonnet? He loved her dearly, but he had to admit that there were times when she sorely tried his patience. "Of course they ain't true," he mumbled. "You're a good woman, Lib."

"Don't try to comfort me, Melton, I beg of you. I do not deserve it. I rebuke you for thinking only of yourself, and here am I, doing exactly the same thing."

Melton patted her hand soothingly. "You're too hard on yourself, Lib. After all, it's human to think of yourself."

"Human!" Liberty cried in a shrill voice. "No, Melton, in this instance you are wrong. It is inhuman to think of one's own comfort when Grace Hunt is lying dead in that terrible, rat-infested house. Wicked, Melton, wicked!"

"Don't take on so, my dove," Melton said uneasily. "You'll go and make yourself ill."

"And if I do, it will be no more than I deserve." Liberty's hand took a tighter grip on Melton's arm. "Melton, I have come to a decision. I shall not go into the house and wallow in comfort while you slog through the snow to do your duty. I shall go with you to the authorities."

Melton's startled eyes peered at her through a veil of swirling snow. "You'll do nothing of the sort," he said, trying to make his voice sound authoritative. "I want to know that you're safely in the house."

Liberty disregarded his tone. "I have said that I am going with you, Melton, and you waste your time in trying to talk me out of it. Another thing, as soon as Madame Blanche's establishment is open, I shall seek the woman out. I will obtain from her the address of Grace Hunt's daughter."

"Now, then, Lib. Leave well enough alone."

"Be silent, Melton! I intend to do all in my power to aid her. As long as I am alive, that poor motherless girl shall not want for a friend."

Melton groaned inwardly. Liberty had really got the bit between her teeth, and he knew from experience that there would be no stopping her now. "Perhaps she don't need a friend, Lib," he ventured. "Could be she's married, with a gaggle of kids. If that's the case, she'll turn to her husband in her time of trouble, as is only right and fitting."

"Nonsense!" Liberty replied sharply. "A sorrowing woman

needs another woman. When it comes to comforting, a man is less than useless. A broken reed, in fact."

Severely affronted by this statement, Melton said stiffly, "That's your opinion, and it ain't a true one. Anyway, what makes you think that Grace's daughter will want you coming around and sticking in your nose where it likely ain't wanted? If I was you, I'd think on that."

"But you are not me, Melton. And kindly don't be impertinent. My mind is quite made up. Whether the girl wishes it or not, I am going to be her friend. In fact, I shall be more, for I intend to guide her in the way she should go through life. In other words, she will be the pupil, I the mentor."

Heaven help the poor girl! Melton thought. "Got it all worked out, ain't you?" he said sarcastically. "You're going to take this kid and mold her. She is a kid, ain't she?"

Liberty's hand stiffened on his arm. "I have no idea of her age, Melton, as you are well aware. However, her age will make no difference."

"Thought it wouldn't. It don't matter what Grace's daughter wants, for you're going to make another Liberty Hayes out of her."

"Melton, I have noted both your impertinence and your sarcasm, and you may be sure that I shall not forget. However, that must be reserved for another time. Tell me something. Is it wrong, in your opinion, for one human being to aid another?"

"No, Lib, not wrong. If the girl wants your help, I'd be the first to approve of anything you might do for her. But the thing is, she might not want it."

"How absurd! One can never have enough friends."

Useless to talk. Useless to attempt to reason with her. Melton's annoyance vanished as suddenly as it had come. In its place was a warm rush of love for this difficult and dictatorial woman whom he could not help loving. Liberty's determination to aid the daughter was quite sincere, and it was, he knew, her way of rising above the shock and horror of the appalling discovery they had made in the condemned house. Melton smiled inwardly as another and more frivolous thought struck him. While Liberty was organizing life for Grace Hunt's daughter, she would have no time to be harrying him. Temporarily freed from her domination, he could make raids on the wine cellar without fear of incurring her wrath. Somewhat ashamed of this last thought, which, in view of the circumstances, was hardly fitting, he said quickly,

"You do whatever you think must be done, my dove. You know I'll be with you all the way."

"A somewhat surprising turnabout," Liberty said, her voice heavy with suspicion. "But thank you, Melton. I felt sure you would come to see things my way."

In an effort to introduce a lighter note, Melton said cheerfully, "Got to see things your way, Lib. If I didn't, you'd make life hell for me."

"Melton!" Liberty exclaimed in a shocked voice. "Are you actually laughing? How can you, after what we have just witnessed!"

"It helps to laugh, Lib. It takes the mind off one's troubles. And better that than to cry, eh?"

"You are a wicked and conscienceless man, Melton!"

"Yes, my dove," Melton answered meekly. "So you're always telling me."

Annaliza let the leather curtain drop back into place as the carriage turned another corner. Almost there, she thought with a surge of relief. Blair Square next, and then Sloane Place. Settling back against the soft cushions, she darted a quick look at Sin's set profile. She had never thought the time would come when she would yearn to be out of his presence. And yet, at this moment she would be heartily relieved to reach the house and escape to the haven of her bedroom. She needed to be alone to sort out her troubled thoughts, and perhaps most of all, to nurse her heartache in private.

Annaliza put a hand to her trembling mouth. During the drive home from Raleigh House, Sin's heavy, brooding silence had stirred mixed emotions in her. At first she had been angry that he dared to ignore her so completely; then something about the quality of his silence had caused a vague fear. Even so, she had attempted to make small talk. Her efforts had been rewarded by curt monosyllables by way of reply from Sin. Rejected, she had given up, letting the uncomfortable silence lengthen. She did not understand him, she told herself. Perhaps she never would. She was certain of only one thing, that she loved him above all else.

With a gentle finger Annaliza touched the lace of her skirt. The pain of impending loss was growing harder to bear. It was like a live thing inside her, clawing, rending. She would have to leave the house in Sloane Place, of course. But what was she to do from now on? Life without Sin! It was not even remotely worthwhile. Her eyes misted. The evening had

started off so well. Sin's attitude at first had been somewhat strange, but then he had changed. He had been so charming, so friendly, that she had been encouraged to hope that a new relationship had begun between them. She had given up hope of Sin's ever loving her, but she had thought they might be friends.

Annaliza's lips tightened as the pain stabbed savagely. Friendship. A poor consolation when she longed so desperately for Sin's love. Even so, she would have been prepared to accept anything, if it meant that she might see him occasionally. Now it would appear that that hoped-for frail link between them, if indeed it had ever existed in the first place, had snapped. She was to be cut off entirely. But why, why? she thought with a rising of hot rebellion. What could she possibly have said or done to turn him into this cold stranger who sat beside her in such stony silence?

Thinking back over the evening, Annaliza frowned thoughtfully. Remembering Lady Araminta's instructions, she had been respectful to the prince. She had not fawned over him, as some of the other ladies had done, but she had paid him the proper amount of reverence due to his exalted station. With all others, she had been pleasant, and, she hoped, unassuming. She had laughed dutifully at jokes, whether or not she found them amusing, and she had danced with whoever asked her. As a final touch, hoping to make Sin proud of her undoubted success with his friends, she had indulged in mild, harmless flirtations with Freddie Renfrew and the stiff-mannered, almost uncomfortably ardent Count von Paschowitz. Nevertheless, her eyes were continually seeking Sin, praying that he would read the message in them and ask her to dance with him again. He had not done so. He seemed to her to have retired within himself, holding aloof from the gaiety all about him.

Annaliza's conscience prodded suddenly. It might be that she had flouted some set convention by agreeing that Freddie Renfrew might call upon her. Had her agreement been unladylike? Was that why Sin was so cold and silent and unapproachable? Was he ashamed of her? Her back stiffened at this last thought. She would not trouble him with her irritating and humiliating presence for too much longer. The golden dream had vanished, never to be recaptured, and her days of playing at princess were over. However much she might yearn to be with Sin, her pride would not allow her to remain under his roof a moment longer than was necessary.

Sighing, she thought of what he had said to her just before they entered the ballroom. "I see no reason why you cannot stay here forever, Annaliza." Words, empty, meaningless words designed to put her at her ease. She, fool that she was, had read too much into them. Well, it no longer mattered. Soon she would be far away. She would not have to be constantly battling to preserve her pride. She was a country girl, and it would be as well if she remembered that. There was no place for her in the glittering, sophisticated world of Lord Sinclair. It was time, more than time, to go back where she belonged.

Hearing Annaliza's forlorn sigh, Sin cursed himself for a tongue-tied fool. What must she be thinking of him? Already the carriage was rumbling its way over the uneven cobbles of Blair Square. Soon Carrington would be turning the corner and drawing up in front of the house, and still he had not addressed one word to her. What was the matter with him? Sin thought in angry self-accusation. Why did he continue to sit beside her like a dolt, when his every inclination was to sweep her into his arms and press his lips to her full, passionate mouth? Why wouldn't words come? He longed to say to her: I love you so much, Annaliza! All my life I will love you. Forgive me for not recognizing the signs of that love. Forgive me for my confusion and my senseless anger, which caused me to use you so unjustly, so unkindly. Tell me I am a fool, for I deserve it. Recriminate against me all you please, but at the end of your accusations, tell me that you love me. Say to me that it is not too late, that you will marry this blind fool. My darling, my little one, my sweet, willful, stubborn Annaliza, please say that you will marry me!

Sin's hands clenched on his lap. He was a coward, a despicable coward. The words flowed easily in his mind, but he could not say them aloud. And why? Because he was afraid of rejection. Annaliza sat beside him, so warm and real, so infinitely precious to him, and he was actually afraid!

He looked at Annaliza from the corner of his eye, and his lips curled in self-contempt. He, who had been called "the wicked Lord Sin," who was noted for his many and scandalous love affairs with actresses, courtesans, and even ladies of quality, was scared to try his luck with this slip of a girl. My God! What had he come to? In a strange kind of way, he thought with a touch of bitter humor, there was a parallel in this. It was the story of Samson and Delilah all over again. This damned thing called love had reduced him to a shorn

Samson, and the Delilah who had wielded the scissors sat beside him. Unlike the real Delilah, however, she was unconscious of the damage she had wrought. Or was she? Was she even now laughing at the arrogant Lord Sinclair, whose proud boast was that he was immune to love?

Another sigh from Annaliza cut into Sin's chaotic thoughts, and he turned his head sharply to look at her. Unsure of himself, his emotions raw and quivering, he immediately leaped to the wrong conclusion. She was bored, unhappy to be with him. She was wishing herself back at the ball, no doubt so that she might resume her blatant flirtation with Freddie Renfrew and with the many other eager hopefuls who had clamored for her attention. There was no denying that Annaliza had been a sensation. Fresh, radiant, unspoiled, a fillip for jaded appetites. Driven by jealousy, he broke his long silence. "That is the second time you have sighed, Annaliza," he said curtly. "What the devil is the matter with you anyway? Are you so very unhappy because I insisted we return home?"

Startled, Annaliza stammered. "N-no, of course not."

"Then perhaps you mourn the cutting short of your scandalous flirtation with Freddie Renfrew?"

Annaliza's temper rose. "How dare you say that to me! You, of all people!"

"And what do you mean by that?" Sin's voice was dangerously soft.

"You know what I mean!" Annaliza almost shouted the words at him. "Have you not twice forced yourself upon me?"

Sin flinched. "I apologize for the first occasion, just as I have apologized for the second. However, I was under the impression yesterday that you wanted me as much as I wanted you. Was I wrong?"

"That is beside the point. You are the last person to talk of scandal. You are a l-libertine, a scoundrel!" Annaliza's chin tilted defiantly. "What have you to say to that, my Lord Sin?"

Sin held himself in check. Surely it was the height of stupidity to feel so stricken, so hurt. He had earned his reputation, and now he was forced to live with it. Annaliza was only repeating what many others had said about him behind his back. But somehow, coming from her lips, it was almost more than he could bear. Even worse, it wrote the finish to all his hopes. "Libertine," she had called him, "scoundrel."

Having such a low opinion of him, naturally she would not even consider his offer of marriage. In the dim light of the carriage lamps, he regarded her closely. Those fascinatingly beautiful eyes of hers were bright with scorn, her soft mouth compressed into a tight line. Turning his head away, Sin said in an even voice, "I have nothing to say to your charges. You are quite right. I am a scoundrel and a libertine, and much more besides. I am, as you are already aware, quite beyond redemption."

Annaliza's anger drained away. She had been cruel and petty, she accused herself. What had possessed her to lash out at him like that? No matter what he had done to her, the fact remained, as he had reminded her, that she had wanted him. "I'm sorry," she said shakily. "My desire was as great as yours, Sin. I admit it freely. I had no right to throw it in your face."

Sin looked at her again, his dark eyes carefully expressionless. "I disagree, my dear Miss Sedgewick. You had every right."

"No, no, of course I didn't, at least, not a-about that." Annaliza's voice broke. "I . . . I am a shrew, a hateful, b-bad-tempered shrew. And please don't call me Miss Sedgewick, or I shall know that you have not f-forgiven me."

Funny, sweet little Annaliza! Sin thought tenderly. "Has it not occurred to you, Annaliza, that it is for you to forgive me? As you mentioned a while ago, you have not forgotten our first meeting."

Scalding color stained Annaliza's cheeks. Forgotten? No, never! That quiet stream, the water cold and silken against her naked, swimming body. She was unaware of the dark eyes watching her, and the shock had been great when a naked man had run forward and plunged into the water. Terrified, she had tried to swim for the bank, but his strong hands had grabbed for her, restraining her efforts, and the placid water had been churned into a maelstrom as she tried madly to break free. Only later, lying dripping and exhausted on the mossy bank, his tanned, naked body pinning her to the ground, his dark eyes burning into hers, had she recognized him as the man she had seen in the royal procession. Lord Sin! He had raped her on that never-to-be-forgotten day, and she had fought him at first. Then, as she was caught up in the heady, delirious joy of his skilled lovemaking, all desire to fight had left her. Consumed by a raging passion, her body burning as though fires had been lit beneath her skin, she had

clung to him in a frenzy, urging him on with her hoarse cries and the frantic thrusting movements of her hips. She had been quite shameless, and it was useless to deny it. After those first shocking moments, when he had taken her by force, her response to his dark fascination had been so ardent that she could do no less than forgive him. After all, if she blamed him, then she must allot an equal amount of blame to herself.

"Why are you smiling, Annaliza?" Sin's puzzled voice brought her back to the present.

"Oh, I was just thinking," she answered shyly. "You called me 'Gypsy.' Do you remember?"

"I remember. Have you forgiven me for that day, Annaliza?"

Confused by the look in his eyes, scarcely knowing how to answer him, Annaliza looked down at her gloved hands. "Y-yes," she stammered. "I . . . I was as much to blame as you."

Sin touched her hands gently. "You must never say that again, Annaliza. In every respect, you were the innocent victim."

Annaliza gave a shaky laugh. "And you were the villain—is that what you would have me believe? Perhaps you were, at first, but only at first." She hesitated; then, forcing herself to speak plainly, she said, "I wanted you, Sin. My actions, my response, must have shown you that."

Yes, Sin thought, remembering the flaring passion of that union, she had wanted him then. But the question was, did she want him now? And if she did, would it be love or lust dictating that wanting? Annaliza! Sin clenched his trembling hands together. From the very beginning, Annaliza had belonged to him, but he had been too blind, too stupid to recognize that simple fact. Should he ask her if she had known it too? Should he say to her: Have I left it too late, Annaliza, or is there the smallest chance that you might return my love? He would do it, he decided now, before his craven fear of rejection overcame him again. He took a deep breath and prepared to speak. Before the first word could emerge from his mouth, the carriage stopped with a sudden jerk, almost depositing Annaliza onto his lap. Helping her upright, Sin said ruefully, "We are home. We must continue this interesting discussion at another time."

What did he mean? Annaliza wondered. Refusing to allow herself to hope again, uncomfortably aware of her heightened

color and her racing heart, she made a great to-do about rubbing the elbow that had collided with Sin's knee. "Yes, we must," she said in an almost inaudible voice.

Sin's cool fingers touched her arm. "What is it?" he inquired.

"It's nothing," Annaliza said quickly.

"Then why are you rubbing your elbow?"

Annaliza shook her head. "You have a very sharp bone in your knee, and my elbow made contact with it. That's all."

Hiding a smile, Sin said gravely, "Then I apologize for my bony knee, and also for Carrington. The man is an excellent driver, but I have never yet been able to teach him how to make a smooth stop. I must give him another lecture, I suppose."

Annaliza laughed. "Poor Carrington! Perhaps he has been sampling the rum punch. If that's the case, why spoil his fun?"

Sin nodded. "Very well, no lecture. And Carrington has been doing a little more than sampling. He reeked of rum. Didn't you notice?"

"I noticed. But he had to do something to while away the time."

"True. But drunk or sober, I can always rely upon Carrington to make the same fumbling stop."

Manford smiled triumphantly as the Sinclair carriage drew to a halt. He felt half-dead with the bone-chilling cold, but he was about to reap his reward. The hatred that had been temporarily banked rose in a hot tide, which, combining with the fumes of the considerable amount of brandy he had consumed, created a maniacal fury that sent new strength coursing through him. Drawing the pistol from his pocket, he gripped it tightly in a tense hand. Careful, he warned himself. Take your time. If you bungle this job, you may never get another chance at it. Remember, two shots, and then away. With the pearls, if you can manage it.

His eyes blazing from a chalk-white face, Manford watched events through a gap between the bushes. The driver, a burly-looking man in a caped greatcoat, looked faceless to Manford. The lower half of his features was covered by a thick woolen scarf, the upper half obscured by the shadow of his wide-brimmed hat. Groaning in an undertone, the man leaned forward. Coming up with two lamps, he

placed them on the ledge beside him. The groaning was interspersed with cursing as he made two clumsy abortive attempts to light them. On his third try, the wicks ignited, spilling a pool of soft yellow light over the snow-piled road.

Watching the man climb laboriously down from his high perch, one of the lamps swinging from his right hand, Manford was conscious of a chill that was not entirely due to the frigid weather. The coachman! God curse him for a dolt! He had neglected to include the coachman in his calculations. If he decided to carry out his plan for the destruction of Sinclair and Annaliza, his foolish mistake might very well cost him dearly.

Unaware of the venomous look directed at his back, Carrington approached the carriage door on cold-stiffened limbs. Setting down the lamp, he opened the door and held out a gloved hand. "My lord," he said in a muffled voice.

"That's all right, Carrington." Lord Sinclair's voice came clearly to Manford's ears. "I'll see to Miss Annaliza."

"If you're sure, my lord."

"I'm sure. You must be frozen to the marrow, man. Go into the house and get yourself a brandy."

Carrington lowered the scarf. "A brandy, my lord?" His breath steamed in the rays cast by the lamp.

"Why the surprise, Carrington?" Sin's drawling voice held a note of amusement. "You're no stranger to brandy, especially when it happens to be mine."

"Me, my lord!" Carrington sounded wounded. "I ain't never touched a drop of your private stock. I take me oath on it."

"Be that as it may, you have my permission to do so now. After you've had a drink, get yourself to bed. Don't worry about the horses. I'll take care of them."

"You, my lord!" Shock replaced injury. "But I can't let you do that."

"Force yourself, Carrington."

Carrington's stiff face relaxed into a smile. "That's very good of you, my lord. Then I'll get myself that drink. I could do with something warming."

"The effects of the rum have worn off, I take it?"

"Rum, my lord?" Carrington blinked innocently. "What rum would that be?"

Sin laughed. "Damned old rogue! Get along with you now."

It was better than he had hoped for, Manford thought as the man ambled off. It would seem that fate was once more smiling upon Richard Manford. "You wait, my high-and-mighty lord," he muttered between clenched teeth. "You've got a real surprise coming to you." Grinning with satisfaction, he returned his attention to the carriage. Sinclair was already out of the carriage. A tall, commanding figure, he held out his hand. A small gloved hand grasped his, and then Annaliza was standing beside him on the frozen sidewalk. Shivering, she stood there, one hand clutching the silver cloak tightly about her, the other holding the delicate flounces of her gown away from contact with the churned-up snow. Her black hair, already lightly powdered with the falling, swirling snowflakes, gleamed in the light of the lamps.

Sin took her shivering arm in a firm clasp. "Come along, Annaliza. I'll open the door for you, and then I'll attend to the horses."

Annaliza shook her head. "I would prefer to wait for you, Sin. I dislike entering a darkened house on my own."

"You would prefer the cold trek to the stables?"

"Yes. I will wait while you rub down the horses and bed them for the night."

"Oh, you will, will you?" Sin smiled at her. "Really, Annaliza, what a child you are!"

Returning the smile, Annaliza was tempted to say: It is because I don't want to say good night to you. Because soon I will be gone, and I might never see you again. I want to linger with you, to store up every precious memory, the look in your eyes, the tone of your voice, the way you smile. Instead she said, "It would be more truthful to say that I am a coward. But I prefer your way of putting it."

"If you persist in this nonsense," Sin said, frowning, "you will take a chill."

"I won't. I'm really very strong. Besides, I'm not a bit cold."

Sin laughed. "Not only a child who is afraid of the dark, but a liar too. Oh, very well, Annaliza, I'll come into the house with you. I'll light every lamp, and then I'll see you safely to your bedroom, where, I have no doubt, you will find Liberty awaiting you. How will that do?"

Annaliza searched around in her mind for further excuses to delay. Finding none, she said rather pettishly, "Oh, very well."

"Give me a moment, then." Stooping, Sin pulled something from the carriage. "I'll throw this blanket over the horses," he said, shaking it out. "It will help keep them warm until I get back."

Annaliza's conscience stabbed. "No, Sin," she said quickly, "I'm being selfish. You do what you have to do."

Sin shook his head. "No," he answered firmly. "I've made up my mind to see you safely to your bedroom, and that's what I'm going to do. With the blanket protecting them, the horses will come to no harm for the sake of an extra few minutes."

Manford's glittering eyes narrowed with excitement. Fussing with the horses, Sinclair had his back turned. Now! he told himself. Strike now! Yelling hoarsely, he leaped the line of bushes, landing in a half-crouched position. He heard the rustle of clothing as Sinclair turned sharply, and then, just before he fired at her, he saw Annaliza's eyes go wide with shock.

With the deafening report of the pistol still ringing in her ears, Annaliza clapped a trembling hand to her shoulder, feeling the warm stickiness of blood trickling through her fingers. There was pain, spreading from a sharp sting to a fiery agony. Her legs! They would no longer support her. "Jonathan!" she said on a sighing breath as she began to fall. "Jonathan!"

It seemed to her that she fell a long, limitless way before her body finally hit the icy ground. Her fast-fading senses picked up the commotion all around her, somebody screaming, a deep voice cursing, the pounding of feet. Lights flared, seeming to emanate from somewhere inside her, and something heavy fell beside her. Just before the darkness claimed her, she heard somebody repeating her name on an agonized note. "Annaliza . . . Annaliza!"

The woman who had screamed was Liberty. She stood above the fallen Manford, her umbrella poised threateningly. She looked at Sin, who was on his knees beside Annaliza, staring at her white, unconscious face with dazed eyes. "We made a good team, my lord," she said in a voice filled with satisfaction. "My umbrella put him off his stride, or his bullet would surely have found you, and that wallop on the jaw you gave him finished him off. A good thing Melton and I happened along at that moment."

Sin turned uncomprehending eyes to Liberty. "Annaliza,"

he said in a shaken voice. "My God, Manford has killed her!"

"Nothing of the sort!" Liberty answered sharply. "She's got a shoulder wound, but I can see for myself that she's breathing." Her voice taking on the note of one who lectures a small boy, she added, "The shots disturbed the neighborhood, and your mother is standing in the doorway. Quite distracted, she looks. Now, my lord, if you don't want the gawkers to think you're a moonling, you'll pick up Miss Annaliza and carry her into the house."

"Bullet went wide of you, my lord," Melton put in hoarsely. "Thank God for Liberty and her umbrella." He rubbed his head reflectively. "Never thought I'd say that and mean it."

"Be silent, Melton!" Liberty glared at him before returning her attention to Sin. "Well, my lord, are you going to pick Miss Annaliza up, or are you going to let her lie there until she dies of the lung fever?"

Without answering, Sin rose to his feet. Picking up Annaliza, he cradled her tenderly in his arms. "Liberty," he said in a poor imitation of his old authoritative voice, "I'm going to send Carrington out. Have him rope Manford up securely. And tell Melton to go for the surgeon."

"Yes, my lord." Pitying him, for she had never thought to see the proud-and-lofty Lord Sinclair so stricken, she watched him walk toward his distracted mother. "I'll see to everything, my lord. Never you fret." She frowned about her at the curious faces in the lighted windows. "You'd think people would have more taste than to stare at other people's troubles," she pronounced.

Melton put in a mild objection. "Only natural, my dove. Shots woke 'em. They're wondering what's going on."

"Then let them wonder in their beds," Liberty retorted, undaunted. Her frown turned on Melton. "You heard his lordship, so don't stand there like a great gaby. After you've sent the surgeon on his way, alert the authorities. Tell them we've got a package for them. Well, go on! I'll stand guard until Carrington gets here."

"I think I should stay, Liberty, my love," Melton protested. "After all, he could come round."

"I hope he does," Liberty said grimly. "I'll know how to protect myself, I promise you." She prodded the unconscious Manford with the umbrella. "So you're Manford, are you? I'll take my oath it was you who murdered Grace Hunt!"

"I was thinking the same thing myself," Melton put in.
"Seems more than likely to me."

"What! Are you still here?" Liberty rounded on him
fiercely. "Scat! Get along with you, you good-for-nothing
lump!"



Annaliza lay listlessly in her bed. Outside the closed window the wind howled, hurling sleet against the streaming panes. Christmas Day, she thought, looking with indifferent eyes at the litter of colored papers and ribbons strewing the counterpane. Christmas Day, and she still confined to her bed, with nothing left to hope for. In a few days' time, when Dr. Blount gave her permission to travel, she would be returning to Cornwall with her father. The journey would mark an end to that wild, sweet episode in her life when she had known and loved Lord Jonathan Sinclair. She would never see him again, her forlorn heart told her.

Annaliza rubbed at her tear-misted eyes. Once or twice when she had lain in her bed half-feverish from the painful wound in her shoulder, Sin had come to her room. Beyond the conventional inquiries as to the state of her health, he had had little to say, but had simply stood there looking down at her. She had tried to read the expression in his eyes. Finally she had decided that they expressed nothing more than polite concern. It was then, in that bitter moment, that she had finally buried the last shreds of her stubbornly lingering hope. However painful it was, she must face reality. She was nothing to Sin, and she never would be. Why had she ever allowed herself to believe otherwise? Almost immediately, she had given herself the answer. It was because she was a romantic fool. Because, her common sense forsaking her, she had actually allowed herself to believe that the plain little girl from the country could capture the love of the noble Lord Sinclair. She had seen him, and her eyes had been dazzled. And then, unknowingly, she had committed the supreme folly of falling in love with him. Folly? Yes, it had been folly of the highest order. Annaliza Sedgewick and Lord Jonathan

Sinclair! Oh, dear God, what a pitiful fool she had been! The things she had envisioned did not happen in real life, but rather in the pages of romantic novels.

In an effort to suppress thought, Annaliza turned her attention to the side table, where her Christmas presents were neatly stacked. A cameo brooch from Lady Araminta, a new prayer book from her father. A box of sweetmeats, an ostrich-feather fan, and a bottle of exotic French perfume from Sin. From Liberty, six exquisitely embroidered handkerchiefs. Presenting the handkerchiefs to her, Liberty had said in a brisk voice, "A merry Christmas to you, Miss Annaliza."

Examining the handkerchiefs, Annaliza had said in an awed voice, "Oh, Liberty, they are truly beautiful. Thank you so much. I shall always treasure them."

Embarrassed color creeping up beneath her sallow skin, Liberty had said in her normal severe voice, "No need to go into raptures, Miss Annaliza. A simple thank-you is quite sufficient."

"But you must have spent hours over the embroidery."

Liberty sniffed. "And what if I did? It's my time to waste, I suppose."

"Liberty, I didn't mean—"

Liberty cut her short. "It's all right, Miss Annaliza, I know exactly what you meant. I thank you, but I'm not one for giving or receiving flowery speeches."

Annaliza hid a smile. "I know that, Liberty."

"See that you remember it." Liberty's stern eyes had lingered for a brief moment on the handkerchiefs. "As you are well aware, Miss Annaliza," she had continued in her most forbidding voice, "I don't hold with frivolity. Never have and never will. However, you're a young thing, and that madman of a Manford might have killed you, so I relaxed my rule and embroidered those handkerchiefs with you in mind. I daresay, like most of the modern-day misses whose heads are stuffed full of nonsense, you prefer pretty to plain."

Liberty's words were particularly appropriate to her, Annaliza had thought. Her head had been stuffed full of nonsense from the moment Sin had entered her life. Trying with some difficulty to achieve a light, carefree voice, she had said with a faint smile, "Yes, Liberty, I prefer pretty to plain."

"Thought you might," Liberty had said, turning to the door. "Your father and the rest of them will be up soon to present their gifts. A fine carry-on, I must say. These days,

folks think more of gifts than they do of our good Lord. Disgraceful!"

Prudently ignoring this tirade, Annaliza said quietly, "Please tell my father that I will be getting up today."

"That you'll not!" Liberty snapped. "You'll stay in bed until dinnertime."

"But I—"

"There are no buts about it, Miss Annaliza," Liberty interrupted. "Later on, so his lordship informs me, Dr. Blount having given his permission, he will be carrying you downstairs so that you can partake of Christmas dinner with the family."

"No!" The word was out before Annaliza could stop it. "My shoulder is almost healed. Tell Lord Sinclair that I am quite capable of walking."

Liberty's mouth set grimly as she studied the girl's flushed face, the agitated trembling hands. "I believe Dr. Blount and his lordship knows what's best for you, Miss Annaliza."

"I won't be carried! I am not a cripple."

"You will, Miss Annaliza. So don't waste your breath."

"Then let Melton carry me."

"Tush! Melton has far too much to do. What with grooming his lordship and making him fancy as a peacock. Sinful vanity, I call it."

"Liberty, please!"

Liberty looked at her keenly. "His lordship is not like to give you a disease, Miss Annaliza."

I can't let Sin touch me again! Annaliza thought frantically. If he does, all the defenses I have managed to build against him will crumble. "Listen to me, Liberty," she said in an unconsciously pleading voice. "If I must be carried, I would prefer Melton to do it."

"Aye, I daresay you would. Which only goes to show that you have very poor taste and ought to have your head examined."

"Liberty, you don't understand."

"I understand more than you think, Miss Annaliza. However, reverting to Melton, I have already told you that he is run off his feet. Not only does he have his normal duties to his lordship to perform, but there are also preparations for the wedding. As you know, I am not one for leaving things until the last minute."

Annaliza's heart began a painful beating. "Lord Sinclair is getting married?" she inquired in an unsteady voice.

Liberty gave her a sharp look. "Not he. His lordship is like to remain a bachelor, unless the party he is pining for recognizes that he loves her."

It was difficult to talk. So incredibly painful to discuss Sin as though it didn't matter to her. "Why . . . why doesn't he just tell the lady that he . . . that he loves her?"

"Why? That's a very good question, Miss Annaliza. His lordship, for some reason that I can't for the life of me fathom, is tongue-tied when it comes to a question of true love. Can't seem to get the words out, if you know what I mean."

Annaliza blinked hard against the threatening tears. "That hardly goes with his reputation. I understand that he has had ladybirds in plenty."

Liberty's lips pursed. "A vulgar expression, Miss Annaliza, and one I dislike to hear on your lips. Ladybirds, indeed!"

"It's true, isn't it?" Annaliza muttered.

"Yes, Miss Annaliza, unfortunately it is true. But those women meant nothing to him. Oh, he's a smooth-enough talker when his heart is not involved. This time, though, it's different. He's as bashful as a schoolboy."

If only Liberty would go! "You never did tell me the name of the lady, Liberty," Annaliza said, more for something to say than from a genuine interest in this unknown woman, whom she hated. "Won't you tell me now?"

"I will not, Miss Annaliza. You'll know when the time comes."

"I doubt that. You haven't forgotten that I shall be going home?"

"We'll see, Miss Annaliza."

Annaliza shrugged. "Then who is getting married, Liberty?"

"I am, Miss Annaliza. I am to wed Melton, sinful lecher though he is, on the day after New Year's Day."

"You are!" Glad of the diversion from her gnawing misery, Annaliza jerked upright in the bed, wincing a little as pain stabbed through her shoulder. "Why, Liberty, my heartiest congratulations. I wish you both every happiness! But why didn't you tell me?"

"I was under the impression that I just did." Liberty fixed Annaliza with a meaningful look. "As to wishing me happy, that remains to be seen. Melton, as I have repeatedly told him, is a wicked man, too inclined to look upon the wine

when it is red. But if my influence can save him from the fires of hell, then I've no doubt we'll be tolerably happy."

Feeling a pang of pity for the unfortunate Melton, Annaliza momentarily forgot her own unhappiness. "Be kind to him, Liberty," she said impulsively. "Poor Melton! He does adore you so."

Liberty's lips pursed disapprovingly. "Poor Melton! What of me, missy, who must wrestle with the devils infesting his soul?" She held up her hand commandingly as Annaliza opened her mouth to speak. "Be easy in your mind, Miss Annaliza. If Melton merits kindness, you may be sure he will receive it."

Annaliza looked at her wonderingly. "I never know what to make of you, Liberty. You sound so hard and so cold, and yet I have the certain feeling that you are nothing of the sort." She hesitated. "You do love Melton, don't you?"

"That is for me to know, Miss Annaliza."

"Liberty!"

Liberty turned away to hide the smile that had touched her lips. "I'm not one for wearing my heart on my sleeve, unlike some people I could mention." With a firm hand she opened the door. "I'll send her ladyship and your father up. No doubt, as soon as that tortoise Melton has finished grooming him, his lordship will be along too."

They had all arrived together, bearing their brightly wrapped gifts: her father, beaming his relief at seeing his cherished daughter so improved; Lady Araminta looking as pretty as a picture in a rustling gown of lavender silk, her hair becomingly arranged and sparkling with the diamond pins that held her intricately twined tresses in place; Sin, immaculate in black, touches of white lace at throat and wrists, so stiff of manner, so unbearably formal.

After Annaliza had exclaimed over the gifts and thanked them, she ventured a question. It was the first she had asked since the night of the shooting, ten days ago. "I think there must be a conspiracy of silence," she began hesitantly, "for no one has thought to give me news of Richard Manford. What is to happen to him?"

At once the atmosphere of the room changed. Her words had conjured up the brooding, malevolent presence of Richard Manford, and suddenly it was as if he stood among them, laughing at them, still planning his hate-inspired, senseless revenge. Lady Araminta's dimpled smile had disappeared, and the Reverend Sedgewick's face was averted. It was Sin

who answered. "Have you heard that Manford confessed to the killing of Grace Hunt?"

Annaliza shuddered. Poor Grace! Poor pathetic little woman! "Yes," she said in a faint voice. "Liberty told me. I . . . I can't help blaming myself. If . . . if I hadn't given Grace the pink cloak, she might be alive today."

Sin's black brows met in a frown. "I thought you might be feeling that way. But it is foolish to blame yourself. It was simply an unfortunate set of circumstances."

"I can't dismiss it so easily, Sin. Liberty told me, when Richard confessed, that he said that the pink cloak fooled him, and he had believed Grace to be me."

"Liberty talks too much. She should not have told you that. You will not blame yourself. Do you understand?"

"But I do, Sin. I think I always will." Annaliza glanced away from Sin's austere face. "Will . . . will Richard be hanged?"

"Naturally. He will receive a fair trial, of course. But in view of his confession—he boasted of the killing, incidentally—hanging is inevitable."

"He boasted!" The color drained from Annaliza's face. "Oh, God! How could he be so evil? I thought I knew him, but I never did. How is it possible for a person to be so wrong about another?"

"No more for now, Sin," Lady Araminta said nervously. "Annaliza is still not well, and we must leave her to her rest."

They had left, her father with a last anxious glance at her pale distraught face, and she was alone with her haunted thoughts. Grace Hunt had had a daughter; she had spoken of her on that day that was to be the last of her life. She would ask Liberty to find the girl and bring her to her. If there was something she could do for her, anything at all, she would do it so gladly.

Annaliza's eyes turned to the loudly ticking clock on the mantelshelf. Time had slipped rapidly away. In another hour, Sin would be coming to carry her down to dinner. Twenty minutes ago, a welcome interruption to thought, Liberty had made a return visit to ready her for the dinner party. She had asked her about Grace Hunt's daughter, and had explained what she had in mind for the girl.

Liberty came to stand beside the bed. "Don't you be worrying your head about Irene Hunt. She'll do very well."

"Irene. So that's her name. But, Liberty, I do worry. I must help her."

"It's been done, Miss Annaliza. I had intended to take the girl under my own wing, but his lordship forestalled me."

"His lordship! What do you mean?"

Liberty's eyes were unusually soft as she answered. "For a sinner, his lordship has his redeeming points. Yes indeed."

Annaliza glared at her impatiently as she fell silent. "Liberty, will you please tell me at once what it is that Lord Sinclair has done for Irene?"

"I don't mind, Miss Annaliza." Liberty sat down on the side of the bed. "After Grace's funeral, very lavish by the way, and paid for by his lordship, he took Irene Hunt up in his carriage, and the young man who was with her, and brought them to this house."

"And?" Annaliza prompted.

"Don't be so impatient, Miss Annaliza. His lordship had a long talk with Irene and her young man, but I did not know the upshot until her ladyship enlightened me later."

Annaliza's hands gripped the edge of the coverlet as Liberty again fell silent. "Liberty," she cried, "if it was your intention to be exasperating, you have succeeded."

Liberty patted her hand. "There's no sense in working yourself up, Miss Annaliza, when you must know I have every intention of telling you the whole. It seems that Irene's young man had an ambition to be a farmer. Wouldn't marry Irene until he'd saved enough to set himself up. Well, his lordship soon solved that problem. He's set Jim Bailey up with some land, a cottage, and a sum of money besides. And after Christmas he plans to attend the wedding of Jim and Irene. That's what I meant when I said the girl would be all right."

Annaliza's eyes were shining. "He did that?" she whispered. "Oh, Liberty, how can you call him a sinner!"

Liberty rose from the bed. "Because he is, Miss Annaliza. But like I said, he has his redeeming points." With brisk movements she gathered up the scattered wrappings and the bright ribbons that littered the bed. Folding the papers neatly and winding the ribbons, she added, "However, I do believe his lordship's reformation is at hand."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind my meaning, Miss Annaliza. It will be clear to you later." Placing the papers and the ribbons on the couch beneath the window, she said, "I'll get rid of that rubbish later. In the meantime, let's get you tidied up."

"Later, Liberty."

"Now, Miss Annaliza," Liberty had answered firmly. "I've other things to do besides waiting on you." Overruling Annaliza's protests, Liberty had brushed her hair until it gleamed. Satisfied with the results of the prolonged brushing, she had then helped her into a white lace negligee, another gift from Lady Araminta. "There, Miss Annaliza," she had said, standing back to survey her handiwork, "I'm thinking you'll do."

Annaliza's temporary glow had faded. With her mind at rest about Irene Hunt, her unhappiness had returned. Uncaring, she had nodded to Liberty. "Thank you," she said in a low voice.

With one of her rare smiles Liberty had said almost archly, "I doubt his lordship will be able to resist you."

"Do you think so, Liberty?" Annaliza's bitter unhappiness was reflected in her tone. "Because if you do, you cannot know Lord Sinclair as well as you believe. I assure you that he will not have the slightest difficulty in resisting me."

"You don't know everything, Miss Annaliza, never think it. His lordship is an open book to me, always has been. There are times when I really believe that I know him better than his own mother." Liberty marched over to the door, her heavy footfalls causing several china ornaments to rattle. "I'll leave you now. Mind you don't go tossing and turning and rumpling yourself." She paused to give the girl a critical look. "Don't let it turn your head, but I will allow that you look very fetching." She flapped a hand in farewell. "I will see you later."

"Yes, Liberty," Annaliza called after her. "And thank you again."

Annaliza started out of her brooding thoughts as a knock sounded on the panel. Liberty? she wondered. Had she come to see if she was still presentable? "Come in," she called in a resigned voice.

The door opened, and Sin strode into the room. "Good evening, Annaliza. How are you feeling?"

Anger rose at his cold, formal tone. Why could he not unbend a little?

"I am well, thank you," Annaliza answered stiffly. She glanced at the clock again. "I was not expecting you just yet. I was under the impression that you would not be coming for me until six o'clock. Why are you here now?"

Sin's glance held hers. "May I not visit with you, if I have the inclination?"

Annaliza shrugged with pretended indifference. "As you please, of course. This is your house."

"Have I offended you in some way, Annaliza?" Sin asked, frowning. "It seems to me that your manner is most unfriendly."

He! To say that to her! If Annaliza had not known herself to be perilously close to tears, she would have laughed. "No, Jonathan," she answered in a stifled voice, "you have not offended me."

"Good. I did wonder." Sin hesitated. "I did have a reason for coming."

"Oh?"

Moving over to the bed, Sin pulled up a chair and sat down. "I have another Christmas gift for you."

"Another gift?" Taken aback, Annaliza stared at him. "But, Sin," she protested, "you have already given me so much."

Ignoring her, Sin drew a small velvet-covered box from his inner pocket. "Here," he said, thrusting it at her. "If it is not welcome, you have only to say so."

Annaliza's fingers trembled as she released the catch. "A . . . a ring!" she exclaimed in a choked voice. Tears misted her eyes as she stared at the circle of fiery diamonds surrounding a perfect emerald. "It is beautiful!"

"I am glad you like it. Well, Annaliza, will you accept it?" Sin did not look at her as he spoke; his eyes were on his folded hands. He stirred restlessly as she remained silent. "Have you lost your tongue?" he demanded in a harsh voice. "Speak up, damn you!"

Annaliza did not understand his harshness and his anger any more than she understood his cold formality. "No, I will not take your gift," she said in a loud, defiant voice. "It is kind of you, but I must refuse." She held out the box. "Take it back, please."

"I see." Sin's dark eyes turned to her, an expression in them that she did not understand. It was as though she had wounded him in some fatal way.

"Jonathan . . ." She faltered. "Why . . . why do you look at me like that? I did not mean to hurt you. You must know that."

"And yet you have, Annaliza. But don't blame yourself, please. You cannot help your feelings. I suppose I knew all along that I had little chance with you, but I had to try." Sin

rose from the chair. "Keep the ring, Annaliza. I don't think I could bear to look at it again."

He was almost to the door before Annaliza found her voice. "Jonathan Sinclair, you come back here this instant!"

Sin turned slowly. "Yes?" he inquired politely.

Annaliza patted the bed. "I want you to sit here beside me."

With every appearance of reluctance, Sin obeyed. "What is this, Annaliza, a wish to prolong my agony? I would not have thought it of you."

"You will be quiet." Annaliza's heart was beating so fast that she could scarcely articulate. She put her hand over his mouth. "I am going to ask you some questions, and you will not answer until I give you permission. Now, my Lord Sin, unless I have gone completely out of my mind, I have the thought that you were proposing to me. Nod if the answer is yes."

Sin nodded. "You love me?" Annaliza removed her trembling hand. "You may speak now."

Sin swallowed. "The question is, I believe, do you love me?"

"I . . . I asked you first."

"So you want to hear the words, do you!" Sin said with restrained violence. "You want to make sure that I make a complete fool of myself. Yes, damn you! I love you, I love you! Are you satisfied now?"

Was it possible to die from happiness? Annaliza wondered. If so, surely she should be dead now. "No," she answered in a shaking voice. "How can I be satisfied, when you have not yet placed the ring upon my finger?"

"What!" Outrage was reflected in Sin's eyes. "You refuse my betrothal ring, and then you have the audacity to expect me to place the damned thing on your finger. What game are you playing now?"

"Oh, my darling fool!" Unchecked, tears streamed from Annaliza's eyes. "How was I to know it was a betrothal ring?"

Sin looked at her searchingly. "You knew," he accused. "I asked you if you would accept it. And why the devil are you crying?"

"Because I love you. I love you so much that I wanted to die at the thought of never seeing you again!"

"You do!" Sin looked at her doubtfully for a moment longer; then, seeing her love for him shining from her eyes, he

said in a muffled voice, "Why, damn your eyes! You really do!" He swept her into his arms, kissing her eyes, her cheeks, and lastly, her tremulous mouth. After several moments he raised his head. "Annaliza Sedgewick, I never would have believed you had such bad taste in men."

"I have perfect taste." Happily Annaliza rested her face against his shoulder. "Let's go down and give our news, my dearest love." She looked at him again, laughter in her eyes. "We have no need to tell Liberty. She already knows."

About the Author

Constance Gluyas was born in London, where she served in the Women's Royal Air Force during World War II. She started her writing career in 1972 and since then has had published a number of novels of historical fiction, including *Savage Eden*, *Rogue's Mistress*, *Woman of Fury*, *Flame of the South*, *The House on Twyford Street*, *Madam Tudor*, and *The Passionate Savage*, available in Signet editions.